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A SCATHING ORDEAL; OR, MAY LANGLEY'S MAD MARRIAGE.

BY MRS. GEORGINA DICKENS.



HE FLUNG HIMSELF DOWN ON THE FERN BESIDE HER.

A Scathing Ordeal;

OR,

May Langley's Mad Marriage.

BY MRS. GEORGINA DICKENS.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT WAS THE MYSTERY?

"AY, you may think there's joy up at the Hall to-day, but it's nearer like a curse. This day a year ago the old master passed away—a death then, a birth to-day—and to my way o' thinking, this day will bring a sorrow that one never could. Well, well, it's the way of the world—sorrow and joy, joy and sorrow; and the two are near akin to each other."

"My word, Granny, how you do go on! There might be some sense in what you say if 'twas some poor person's child; but this baby is heiress to Normanton, and goodness knows what besides. She'll find pleasure enough in this world, I'll be bound."

There was something of regret and discontent in the girl's voice, and involuntarily a sigh escaped her as she bent her head lower over her work.

She had been turning the ribbon on a straw hat which had seen some wear, endeavoring, with a good deal of ingenuity, to hide the parts which the sun had faded; but, try as she would, she could not arrange it to her satisfaction.

Impatiently tossing the hat aside, she rose and stood with her folded arms resting on the window-sill, gazing out thoughtfully through the open casement over the beautiful grounds, which stretched before her almost as far as the eye could reach.

The old woman watched her for a moment or two in silence; then she too sighed. Going up to the young girl, she laid her withered, work-worn hand gently on the soft, rounded shoulder.

"I know what's in your heart, Bess, my girl; I can read your thoughts just as plain as—"

Innocent as the words were, they made her granddaughter start nervously, and look with anxious inquiry into her face.

"What d'you mean?" she asked, quickly.

"Only this, child; that you've no cause to envy that poor babe up yonder. It'll have its share of trouble like the rest of us. 'Tisn't money that brings happiness."

"I'd like to have the chance to try, that's all!" rejoined Bess, with a short laugh. "Why should some folks have all they want, and more besides, when we've got so little. 'Tisn't right, that's what I say—'tisn't right!"

"Hush, girl, hush! You've no right to say that. If it hadn't been for Mr. Langley we might have been turned away from the lodge, and goodness only knows where we'd have gone then. It's not every one coming to a property would have been so willing to have kept on an old servant. No, no; he's a good master, and we ought to be grateful. Poor gentleman, he don't seem to be happy, for all his riches. I never saw a man more cast down and doleful like."

"Oh, he's been anxious about his wife, I fancy, that's all, Granny. You'll see he will be bright enough now the baby is come."

"That's as it may be. I've a word I could say about it if I'd a mind to," mumbled the old woman, oracularly, as she turned away from the window and resumed her seat in the chimney corner.

"You do not mean that you've found out anything, Gran?" exclaimed her granddaughter, excitedly. "They're always asking me about the Hall when I go down to the village; and they've got hold of some queer stories about the family, I can tell you. It's only twice in the whole six months they've been here that Mr. Langley has been outside the gates. Mrs. Bond, of the post-office, told me that not a single

invitation have they accepted, though all the best families round have asked them to their houses, and—"

"Mrs. Bond is a sight too fond of talking!" interrupted the grandmother. "I'll have to stop your going to the village, if you waste your time listening to such idle gossip as that."

"But, granny, you owned that you knew something yourself."

"Ay, ay; I could speak if I would, no fear. A likely thing, though, that I'd be telling all I know to a giddy young thing like you! Why, it would be in every one's mouth before the end of the week!"

"No, indeed, Gran, not if I promise. I can keep a secret as well as any one."

"And you'll never go and chat about it?"

"No, never; as sure as I am here."

"Well, let me see. 'Twas yesterday evening, just about this time, I was standing by the garden-gate— But there, I ought not to speak, after all, for it wasn't meant for my ears. Least said's soonest mended."

"Indeed, Granny, but you must speak now; you said you would if I'd promise not to tell," Bess said, coaxingly. "You were standing by the garden-gate, you said."

"Yes," went on the old woman slowly, "by the garden-gate, when who should come walking down the foot-path which runs by the drive but the master, his eyes on the ground, as usual, and his arms folded over his chest. I made so bold as to wish him good-evening; and he came close up to the railings, and stood speaking to me a while about my roses. They're as fine as any up at the Hall; and he couldn't but own as much, though I says it as shouldn't."

"Yes—yes, I know all that, Gran! But go on. I don't see what the roses has got to do with it."

"Then I do, my girl, for if it hadn't been for the roses he wouldn't have stopped. I don't know where I was, with you interrupting me like that!"

"You'd got no further than the garden-gate," Bess said slyly.

"Ah, to be sure! and the master was speaking to me about my roses. But I could see it wasn't of them he was thinking at all; and small blame to him too, for the carriage had but just gone down to fetch the doctor. No doubt he'd walked as far as the lodge to wait for it to come back, being too nervous like to stop in the house. You see, nobody ever thought that the mistress would have been taken ill so soon, and they were all in a fine flurry up at the Hall."

"Well, I'd heard that from Mary Brown, who'd been sewing there; so I says to him that I hoped all would go well with his lady, and that before morning dawned he might be father to a fine son and heir."

"No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I saw I'd said something as I'd better have left unsaid, for he turned just as white as white could be; and a great groan came from him, for all the world as if he was in some mighty pain. Then, when he saw me look frightened—as well I might—he tried to smile, and said as 'twas nothing—only a sudden spasm, as took him sometimes. I might have thought he was speaking the truth if I'd heard no more; but that wasn't all."

"Just then the carriage came dashing up, and I took a step or two forward before I saw you'd gone already to open the gates. I stayed where I was, and turned to look at the master. He was standing with his two arms stretched upward, his head thrown back, and his eyes cast up at the sky, with a look in them I shall never forget to my dying day."

"Oh, Bess! talk of rich folks being happy, and having all they want! That wretched look of misery on his white face told something different to all that! You see, he thought I'd left him, and he was alone. It seemed like as if the words were forced from him."

"Oh, Heaven!" he cried, and his voice was deep and shaking; "if my poor child lives, have mercy on it! Let not the awful curse fall upon

its innocent head! mine was the sin; let mine alone be the punishment!"

"There! these was his very words! They've been ringing in my ears ever since. I can't, somehow, get them out of my head."

"My goodness, Gran! it sounds awful! Whatever can he have done, and who can have cursed him? I'd give something to get at the bottom of it all. I—I wonder if Mr. Dexter knows. He's known the master all his life. They were boys together; he told me so."

"He told you so, did he?" inquired her grandmother, sharply. "I thought he was a great deal too proud and stuck-up to talk to the likes of us. There's the difference between true gentlefolks and those that are not. One would think, to see Abel Dexter, with his fine clothes and his diamond ring, and to hear the way he speaks, that he was the master, instead of only a servant."

"A servant, indeed, Gran! He isn't that, I'm sure. He's the secretary, so there!"

The girl's cheeks flushed, and she spoke defiantly and with unnecessary warmth.

"Secretary, he calls himself, does he?" retorted the old woman, angrily. "Then who's the valet, I'd like to know? It's he who waits on the master; none else. And it's the first time that ever I heard of the secretary doing valet's work."

"My husband was ten years coachman in the old squire's family, so I should know something of servant's duties! Secretary, indeed! Valet's not fine sounding enough for him, I suppose! If I was the master I'd just pack him out of the house—him and his old mother, bag and baggage! They'll find it hard work to get a decent servant to stop at the hall so long as she's housekeeper! Bah! I hate the very sight of the couple of them!"

"'Twas but yesterday, as I was telling you, that I went up to the house, thinking that I might be of use, for I'd heard there was no nurse come. I was shown into Mrs. Dexter's own room—just as fine as any lady's drawing-room, if you please. She never so much as asked me to be seated; but looks down at me as I might be the dirt beneath her feet."

"I shall attend on Mrs. Langley myself," says she, as proud and haughty as a queen. 'If we'd wanted other help we should have sent to the city, but Mrs. Langley has a great dislike to strangers.'

"So that was all I got for my pains! Then she sends an impudent hussy of a servant to the door with me, as if she thought I might lay my hands on something if I wasn't watched. I never thought that the time would ever come when I should be hustled out of the house like that. And to think of the times, many and oft, that my dear lady that's gone has had me into her own parlor and poured me out a glass of wine with her own hands! Ah, well! those days are gone, and they'll never come back again—more's the pity! The world's all wrong somehow nowadays; or, maybe, I've grown too old for it!"

She shook her head dolefully, and passed her hand wearily across her brow.

It was not often that Bess suffered her grandmother to ramble on so long without an interruption. The old woman, wondering at her unusual silence, looked up presently, and found that the little kitchen had no other occupant than herself. Bess's quick ear had caught the sound of wheels on the road outside, and she had hastened out to open the gates.

"The doctor again?" murmured the girl to herself, as she stepped aside and stood when it had passed, with one hand shading her eyes looking after the carriage, which was being driven rapidly toward the house. "It's not two hours since he was here; I wonder if anything's amiss."

She remained for several minutes in the same position, her pretty brows puckered into a thoughtful frown, her red lips pressed tightly together.

The Hall possessed a new interest for her after what her grandmother had said. She was already burning with curiosity respecting

the mysterious words which Mr. Langley had used. To her ignorant and superstitious mind, there was something positively fascinating in the very word "curse."

Only two days ago Mrs. Bond had said, "I wonder, Bess, you know so little about the family, living as you do under their very noses so to say."

This remark recurred to her now.

"I'll have to find it all out one of these days," she decided.

It would be hard if, with such chances as she had, she could not manage to discover something of what went on at the old house.

Before her the long white drive wound in and out beneath two somber rows of giant evergreens, and beyond, on a grassy terrace, rose the massive red-brick building, its windows gleaming with a lurid light from between the twisted branches as they reflected the rays of the setting sun.

In Bess's vivid imagination, it seemed almost as if the Hall were ablaze, burning and glowing with some awful and supernatural fire that gave forth neither sound nor smoke.

"Granny," she said to the old woman, who just then appeared in the doorway, "the house looks strange this evening, doesn't it?"

"Tut, tut, girl!—what have you got in your head now? There's nothing different to what I've seen almost every evening at sunset. Your brains are wool-gathering, my lass. Come, don't stand there idling; it's time the supper was made ready. Why, I declare, here's Will Bates! What's he been doing up at the Hall, I wonder? This is an odd time to be having carpentering done."

"Good-evening to you, Will. You've been working late, I see. Step in and rest a little, my lad, and have a bite of supper with us."

"Yes, do, Will," put in Bess, pleasantly. "There's only bread and cheese; but such as it is, you're welcome."

She led the way into the lodge without waiting for his reply, knowing well enough that he could not withstand the smile with which her words were accompanied.

Poor Will blushed with pleasure at her unusually gracious manner. Only too glad of the chance of half an hour's chat, he unslung his basket of tools from his shoulder and entered the kitchen.

"I suppose it's not inside the house you've been working, is it, Will?" the girl began, cautiously, when, a few minutes later, they were all seated before the round table on which the simple supper had been laid. "They'd hardly like your hammering just now, I fancy."

"So I should have thought too," the young man replied, slowly. "I asked Mr. Dexter if the job hadn't better wait over a little, for I couldn't do the work he wanted without some noise, and I knew the lady was ill."

"Then you was in the house?" queried the old woman, no whit less curious than her granddaughter.

"Yes, Mrs. Pearson; I've been putting a new lock to a door in one of the rooms of the east wing; the old one had been wrenched clean off. I can't think how it could be done; it was broken right off, and some of the wood-work along with it."

"I cannot understand why they should be in such a hurry to have it mended," Bess remarked, thoughtfully. "The east wing was hardly ever used in the old Squire's time; it's so old—and damp too, they say. I remember two years ago, when the house was full of company, and I had gone to help in the kitchen, they put me to sleep there one night, for I'd stayed late. I'd never have stopped, only I didn't like to go back then and wake up grandmother. You see, I've always had a dread of that part of the house—it's so lonely. Nay, they say it's haunted, too, only I didn't know that then. Such a dismal sort of a room they put me in! One at the very end of the long corridor."

"That must have been the same room where I was working," Will interposed; "only I

couldn't see inside of it, for the baize inner door was closed all the while."

"The baize door!" cried the girl, excitedly; "there was no baize door when I was there. D'you mean to say there are two doors?"

"To be sure. There is nothing very strange in that, Bess; it's common enough to have two doors. If people don't want to hear the noise of the house, or are afraid of draughts, there's nothing better."

But Bess was not to be satisfied with any such simple explanation. She felt certain that there must be some sinister motive in those two doors, on the outer one of which so strong a lock was required. Her curiosity was raised to such a pitch, that for hours that night she felt too excited to retire to rest, and sat, instead, before the small window in her room, unable to withdraw her eyes from the Hall, which looked more weird than ever in the ghostly, uncertain moonlight.

CHAPTER II.

A BATTLE FOUGHT AND WON.

"WILL it live, doctor?"

The speaker, but little more than a child herself, partly raised her head, with its wealth of dark silky curls, from the frilled pillow, and eagerly, almost wildly, gazed into the doctor's face as he parted the delicate lace curtains of a swan-shaped cot at the further end of the room, and bent with grave solicitude over its tiny occupant.

"Live?—yes, I trust so."

There was more severity than hopefulness in his voice; and his face, usually so kind and sympathetic, assumed its very sternest aspect. He let the filmy curtains fall back to their place, and, crossing the room, sat down near the bed.

"Mrs. Langley, I will not disguise from you the real facts of the case. I told you this morning how very important it was that you should nurse your baby yourself."

He paused for a moment, apparently to listen to the feeble wailing which came from the child, but in reality to give his patient time to recover herself; for his practiced eye had been quick to detect the feverish flush which rushed to her face, and the half-frightened, half-pleading look which came into the soft brown eyes.

"I thought, as I say, that it was important this morning; this evening I consider it to be absolutely necessary, if you would save your child's life."

She made no reply, but raising her two small white hands, covered her face with them.

He fancied she was wavering—deliberating; and to add force to his words, he fetched the baby and laid it gently by her side, thinking the sight of it would speak more eloquently than he could.

She did not discover what he had done, till a slight cry close to her made her start and look down at it.

There was no doubting the expression in her eyes then. They distended unnaturally with a look of horror and aversion, while the flush that had been on her cheeks a moment before, faded away, leaving them of a wax-like pallor.

"Take it away!" she cried, scarcely above a whisper, her voice dry and hoarse, though each word was terribly distinct. "Take it away! I—I cannot look at it!"

The good doctor hastened to comply with her request. To tell the truth, he was not a little startled. Mrs. Langley was nervous and excitable—he knew that; but there was something more in all this than mere nervousness and excitability. In all the course of his experience he had never had so difficult a case to deal with. This was the first time, thank Heaven—and he hoped it might be the last—that he had ever seen such a look on the face of any mother at such a time.

Horrible as the idea was, it seemed that Mrs. Langley was actually seized with a positive aversion to her own child.

Replacing the baby in its cradle, he went to

the window, and stood there looking out, with his hands clasped behind his back, not knowing exactly what to do next.

He dared not argue the point any further, for the excitement of a discussion would undoubtedly prove dangerous to the mother. On the other hand, if he let things rest as they were, there was hardly a chance that the child, weak and feeble as it was, could live.

Never was a man placed in such an awkward dilemma. He had already attempted to talk the matter over with Mr. Langley; but the only answer he could get was—"I trust my wife will be urged to do nothing against her will."

There was silence in the room for nearly five minutes; then a voice came from the bed—a pleading voice now, plaintive and patient.

"Doctor—Doctor Mellor! Please don't be very angry with me!"

He went to her at once, and smiled down at her reassuringly.

The fawn-like eyes were full of tears, the baby mouth quivering with emotion. After all, she was such a child, it was impossible to be angry with her. He took the small hand so shyly extended to him, and resumed his seat by the bed.

"It is such a pity, my dear,"—the word escaped him unconsciously—"such a great pity that you excite yourself in this way."

"I—I can't help it, doctor; I can't, indeed!" she replied, with an hysterical little sob.

"Well, well, never mind that now." He patted the trembling fingers softly. "I do wish you had some relation—some lady friend who could come and talk to you instead of me. I am a rough old fellow, I know, and I don't say things always as I ought; still, you must know that when I urge a thing as I urge this, it is because I believe—because I know it is to be for the best."

"Yes, I know," she sighed, wearily; but still she showed no sign of relenting.

"How do you like your nurse?" he inquired, abruptly.

She glanced nervously round the room before replying, and her voice lowered.

"Pretty well—that is, not very much, I think. She is the housekeeper, you know, but she understands nursing very well."

"Ah, yes, I dare say," Doctor Mellor said, doubtfully; "still, I should have preferred a regular nurse. It is not too late for me to have one down from the city now if you wish it."

"Oh, no; please do not suggest such a thing," she hastened to say. "Mrs. Dexter would not like it."

"As you please, of course," rejoined the doctor; "but I think your recovery would be more rapid with a more experienced person."

She looked a little blank at this, and he was quick to seize his advantage.

"It has just occurred to me that you might perhaps like my wife to come and see you sometimes. She has had a large family of her own, so should know something of these matters; and she is so bright and cheerful—But, bless my soul! here am I forgetting all my other patients. I must be off at once."

Before she had time to raise any objections—before she could say one word even against his proposition—he had left the room, with a hurried "Good-evening to you," and was halfway down the stairs, chuckling to himself contentedly over this clever diplomatic move.

"If any one can bring her to her senses and get her to do what is right, it is Mary," he thought.

Doctor Mellor had unbounded faith in his wife, and that faith seldom proved to be misplaced.

"So he's gone at last, is he?" said Mrs. Dexter, coming into the room with that noiseless, cat-like step which some people persist in adopting in a sick-room, and which is so irritating to an invalid. "He thought he would be able to talk you over if he saw you alone, I dare say. A likely thing! Did he think I had been persuading you not to nurse the child, I

wonder? Really, I should like to know what is going to happen next!"

"You did say the baby would get on very well with the bottle," Mrs. Langley ventured to say.

"And so it would, too; it's only Doctor Mellor's old-fashioned notions. Lor', I've seen children twice as weak and sickly-looking as this grow to be fine and hearty on the bottle; you will see how it will thrive, and—"

"Hush! Oh, please, hush!" cried the poor little mother, closing her eyes and turning her face restlessly on the pillow, while great tears began to force their way, one by one, through the long, dusky lashes. "If only I could have died—I and baby! If only we could have died!"

"And, indeed, it would be a mercy if the child was taken, at any rate," said Mrs. Dexter, in no way moved by the infinite pathos of the words, wrung as they were out of her very misery.

"You have no right to say that," Mrs. Langley rejoined, excitedly, hardly knowing what it was she said. "How dare you say it would be a mercy if my child were to die? Oh, baby, baby, how proud I thought I should have been of you! How happy I was, making your tiny clothes! How I used to think of you and dream of you, and never, never tire of thinking of you! And now—and now—"

Her voice was choked with sobs; she could say no more.

Mrs. Dexter was not utterly heartless; she did what she could to soothe her mistress. She held a cooling draught to her lips, and smoothed away the damp lock of hair from the tear-stained cheeks.

Before long the poor girl, quite worn out and exhausted, fell into a heavy, dreamless sleep, from which she did not awaken for nearly an hour.

When at length she awoke she did not immediately open her eyes. Mrs. Dexter would be worrying her to take something perhaps, as soon as she knew she no longer slept. So she lay there with eyes closed yet a little longer.

Gradually she became aware that there was a scent of roses in the air, and that a soft, cooling breeze was being wafted across her face. How refreshing it was! She could almost fancy she was in her favorite seat by the oriel window of her own boudoir, with the great creamy Gloire-de-Dijon roses climbing round the carved stone framework near her and nodding their dewy heads in the balmy summer breeze.

The white lids lifted languidly only a little way. From beneath the partly-lowered lashes she could see the little table which stood beside the bed. The roses were there in a vase of water, and near them were some green and purple grapes.

Who had placed them there? Not Mrs. Dexter, surely; she was not given to such little attentions. Had Marmaduke, her husband, brought them while she slept?

The thought brought the color to her cheeks, and a deep sigh escaped her, while at the same time she looked up and met the glance of a pair of kindly gray eyes.

A lady was seated near her; not with her bonnet and shawl on; Mrs. Mellor knew better than that. She wore a gown of some soft gray material, with a white handkerchief crossed over her chest; her silvery hair was smoothed away beneath a snowy cap. She looked as much at home as if she had been there for a week. A piece of work of some kind was on her lap; but just now she was not sewing, for she held a large fan in one hand, with which she gently fanned the invalid.

"You have had a nice sleep, my dear. It has done you good, I see," she said, with a smile.

Such a soft, sweet smile! A feeling of peacefulness and security stole over Mrs. Langley as her eyes rested on the kind, sympathetic face.

She could not remember her mother. She had died so long ago. If she had lived, she fancied she would have had just such a face as that, and smiled on her with just such a smile.

"Who are you?" she asked, wonderingly, putting out her hand and letting her fingers touch those of the lady, as if she hardly believed in her reality. "How is it Mrs. Dexter let you come to me?"

"I don't think there was any question of 'letting,' my dear. My husband sent me to sit with you for an hour or so, and doctors' orders must be obeyed, you know."

"Ah, yes! And you are Mrs. Mellor. I remember it all now. But where is Mrs. Dexter?"

The nervous look returned once more, and she glanced around anxiously.

"I asked her to see that some beef tea was got ready for you by the time you awoke. She has but just left the room. Shall I call her?"

"Oh, no; please do not."

Mrs. Langley's fingers closed spasmodically over the hand. She seemed to have a strange dread of being left alone.

"Who was it brought the fruit and flowers?" she asked next. "Was it you?"

"Indeed, no," Mrs. Mellor replied. "We have none half so fine. It was your husband. He—"

"Did he come in—in this room, I mean?"

She strove to speak calmly, but it was with difficulty she could command her voice.

"No, he would not, though I wanted him to come and see you while you slept. He said he would rather wait until you asked for him. He just put the fruit and flowers into my hands, and then went away; but he gave such a wistful look at the room, I am sure he found it hard to refuse. After you have taken your beef tea and I have brushed your hair, you will let him come, will you not?"

"Must I—I—I mean, yes, I suppose so; but not just yet. By and by perhaps."

Mrs. Mellor feigned not to notice her agitation, though she wondered a little at her strange manner.

Mrs. Dexter came into the room soon after, not in the best of tempers, as could be seen by her tightly-compressed lips.

She was pushing rudely past the doctor's wife, when, to her surprise and mortification, that lady, with a quiet dignity, took the tray from her hands and proceeded to give Mrs. Langley the beef-tea herself.

"It seems I'm not wanted here," she said, impudently, with a toss of her head, not even attempting to disguise her annoyance. "Yet I did think I was quite capable of attending on Mrs. Langley without any other help."

Mrs. Mellor was astounded at the woman's cool effrontery. How could Mr. Langley suffer such a person to remain near his wife? All she said, however, was: "I am here by my husband's express desire."

"I suppose he thought you would be able to persuade her to nurse the child! You won't find it such an easy matter."

"Was it really only for that you came?" Mrs. Langley asked, reproachfully.

"My dear, it is true that was one of my reasons; but I should have come anyway as soon as I heard that you were alone."

The poor girl gave her a grateful smile. It was so true that she was alone—more terribly alone than her new friend could imagine; yet she feared to accept the friendship so freely offered, and for which she so longed.

For some time Mrs. Mellor sat beside her, talking pleasantly of anything she thought might amuse or interest her; of little bits of harmless gossip in the neighborhood; of her own sons and daughters, most of them married now and living at a distance; then, gradually, when Mrs. Dexter had left them to go and have her supper, she approached the all-important subject.

"Tell me, my child, what the objection is which you have to nursing your baby. Perhaps I may be able to overcome it."

"I cannot explain; you would not understand. I—I think I am afraid of it!" she added, with an hysterical little laugh which almost ended in a sob.

"Afraid of your own child! That cannot be. You are nervous, that is all. Such a pretty little thing as it is too! with eyes just like her father. Ah! you will be very proud of her when she is a little older."

"Eyes like Marmaduke, did you say?" cried the mother, in sudden and unaccountable alarm. "Then it is true! I fancied so myself."

Mrs. Mellor, though she was at a loss to understand the meaning of it, saw that the allusion to the father had not been a happy one, so she hastened to change the subject.

"I think you know Mrs. Brereton?" she said next. "She lives at the Grange, not far from here."

"Very slightly," Mrs. Langley replied, only too glad to talk of anything else. "She and the colonel called upon me, and I returned the call; that is all I have seen of them. She looked ill and unhappy, I fancied."

"Yet she is not really ill—in body, at least; but she has a secret sorrow which preys upon her mind. I should like to tell you about it if you will let me."

"Six years ago she had a little son. Like you, she was greatly averse to nursing him herself. She was a beautiful woman then, though you would hardly think it to see her now, and very fond of society. She was unwilling to deny herself any pleasure even for her child's sake. My husband said all he could to persuade her, but in vain. She fancied he exaggerated when he told her the boy's life depended upon it, and would listen to neither him nor her husband."

"My dear, she was terribly punished. The poor baby grew weaker and more feeble every day. When it was too late, she would have given all she had to save him. Day after day she would sit with the child on her lap, her tearless eyes fixed with an expression of hopeless agony, on the little wasted face. Ah, how she must have hated those foolish vanities and pleasures for which she had sacrificed him! To make her misery the greater, she had to endure her husband's well-merited, though silent reproach. He never accused her in words, but there was something in his very silence which must have been doubly hard for her to bear."

"Well, the end came all too soon. They thought she would have gone mad when the child died, and in their fright they sent for me. It was dreadful to hear her self-accusations and to be able to offer her no consolation. I went up to her, and endeavored to take her in my arms, but she put out her hands, as if to keep me from her, crying out wildly, 'Do not touch me! You would not if you knew! I am a murderess; I have killed my own child!'"

"Oh, my dear, if you had heard her then; if you could know what her life has been since, you would not hesitate now to do what is right."

"The colonel is a just and good man. I do not think he has spoken one unkind word to her; indeed, I think he has been more considerate to her, if possible, since; but there is a difference. He has never been quite the same. You see, he was so anxious for an heir—so proud when the boy was born; and they have had no other children."

She drew a deep sigh when she concluded; then, taking up her work, went quietly on with her sewing.

Mrs. Langley was silently weeping. There was no word spoken by either of them for some minutes. The poor girl was evidently fighting a hard battle with herself.

By-and-by she raised her face, all woe-begone and tear-stained, a pitiful little smile trembling on her lips.

Mrs. Mellor rose, and stooping, kissed her. She understood what it meant, and knew that she had conquered.

CHAPTER III.

THE SECRET OF THE EAST WING.

The Normanton estate, though not large, was one of the most beautiful and picturesque properties in the whole country. There was

no more romantic spot for miles around than that portion of the grounds through which the river wound its course. A plantation of beeches grew on the sloping banks, and close to the edge weeping willows arched their slender branches, and at every breath of wind swept the shining surface of the water with their pale green boughs.

In spring the ground was covered with violets and wood anemones; a little later the wild hyacinths spread like a vast blue carpet beneath the trees. But now summer was already far advanced; violets, anemones and blue-bells had all in turn disappeared, and in their place feathery ferns grew thickly everywhere in luxuriant profusion, only interspersed here and there by buttercups and daisies.

Among these same ferns, half sitting, half reclining, was Bess Pearson, the lodge-keeper's granddaughter. She had taken off her hat, for the afternoon was warm, and the little flecks of sunlight came trembling through the gently stirring branches of the beeches upon her uncovered head, making her chestnut hair glint like red gold.

She was a pretty girl—very pretty, as she lay back there against the green fern fronds, with the broken light and shade resting on her; but a look of discontent clouded her face, and the rosy lips were pouting. Her dress was but of coarse blue-and-white-striped calico, and the edges of it were frayed and soiled; there were two or three rents in the skirt, too, which she had not attempted to mend—Bess hated needlework.

The girl's natural vanity and love of finery were apparent in the bunch of scarlet poppies fastened at her neck, and the string of mock coral beads which encircled the full and shapely throat.

A pace or two from her stood Abel Dexter, leaning carelessly against a tree, smoking a cigar.

He was a tall, powerful-looking man, of some thirty-five years of age, with a dark, sal-low complexion, and hair and eyes black as ink. At a first glance, one might have taken him for a gentleman. He had an easy grace of movement, a somewhat haughty carriage of the head, a certain air of refinement which one seldom sees in one of the lower orders. A closer observer, however, would soon have detected that his appearance alone was in his favor, for every word and action displayed his indomitable pride and insolence. He acknowledged no superiors, while to those whom he considered his inferiors he was overbearing and exacting in the extreme.

Such being his character, it was not a little surprising that he should consent to hold the equivocal position which he did at Normanton Hall.

Doubtless, though, Abel had his own reasons for remaining in Mr. Langley's household. It is certain that both he and his mother had no very bad time of it there, and the remuneration which they received for their very meager services must have been decidedly handsome, to judge by the way Mrs. Dexter dressed, and by the ample means which her son always seemed to have at his disposal.

Poor, ignorant Bess thought herself a very lucky girl when she succeeded in attracting his attention, and it is doubtful whether half the girls in the village would not have envied her had they known that he had actually consented to fall in love with her, and to tell her so, too.

But at least half the pleasure of her triumph was spoiled by the fact that they did not know, for he had strictly forbidden her to speak to any one of their meetings.

It was this very subject which they had been discussing to-day, and which had brought such a discontented expression to the pretty face.

"I'm sure I can't see why you shouldn't let me tell folks that we're to be married one of these days," she said, fretfully.

"I don't suppose you can, my dear; you must allow me to be the best judge of that."

He regarded her critically as he spoke, thinking the heightened color brought to her cheeks

by that slight ebullition of temper rather becoming than otherwise. He was speculating on how she would look in a passion; he could just imagine how those dark eyes of hers would blaze and flash; there was a want of animation about her usually.

"Sometimes I wonder, Abel, if you ain't making a fool of me after all," she said, with a pettish impatience, watching him askance the while from under her long lashes. "If you mean true, what's to prevent you making me your wife at once? You're rich enough. It does seem so hard that I should have to go on living at the lodge with Granny, and wearing these shabby clothes, when you're looking just like a gentleman. She looked very much inclined to cry as she concluded.

With a half smile, he flung himself down on the ferns beside her, and put one arm round her waist.

"Now, Bess, you are unreasonable. Do you think if I could do what I liked that I wouldn't marry you to-morrow?"

"I don't know," she rejoined, averting her head, and turning partly away from him. "I know well enough that I'm not half good enough for you. There's Jane Bond would give her eyes for you, and Nellie James, too; and they do say she'll have a fortune. How do I know but you'll get to like one of them in time, and—and where will I be then? There, I think, for I'd never try to live without you!"

She pointed to the sluggish river, flowing silently before them. But for a broken twig or a fallen leaf or two floating on its surface, one might have thought the water stationary.

He took the outstretched hand in his, and drawing her to him, passionately kissed the full, pouting lips and tear-dimmed eyes.

"You little darling! Don't you know it's you I love, and no one else? Listen to me; I will tell you why I don't want us to get married for a year or two if it can possibly be avoided. You say I am rich enough. Well, maybe I am; but I'm not as rich as I mean to be by a long way. I mean that my wife"—the word made Bess smile proudly, and rest her head lovingly on his arm—"shall ride in her carriage. There! what do you say to that?—ride in her carriage and wear silks and satins every day of her life, if she likes!"

"Do you mean it really, Abel—really and truly?" the girl asked, a flush of pleasure and excitement rushing over her face, and her eyes sparkling with animation. "And will I wear rings and jewels, and lace and feathers, just like a lady? Oh, Abel! it seems it's all too good to be true! How I've longed, and longed, and prayed for these things! And now only to think that one day it'll all come true!"

"And it's worth waiting a bit for Bess, isn't it it?"

"Yes, I suppose it is," she replied, somewhat dubiously, not quite so sure of this. "Abel," she began again, after a slight pause, "I'd like to know where all this money is coming from?"

He frowned at her words, and the arm which still encircled her waist was withdrawn.

"You are always wanting to know something, Bess. Why can't you be content to trust me without asking questions?"

"I thought, when folks were in love, they always told each other everything?" she rejoined. "I'm sure I tell you everything I know!"

"Well, so do I—that is everything that is right you should know!"

"No, you don't, Abel; you never tell me anything—not even what goes on at the Hall!"

"What goes on at the Hall?" he exclaimed, in unfeigned surprise. "Why, how could anything that takes place there possibly interest you?"

"Oh, I know more about it than you think!" she went on, nodding her head, with an assumption of sagacity and wisdom. "Folks will talk, you know."

"Oh, folks talk, do they? They had better be minding their own business, I think!"

There was an ominous scowl upon his hand-

some face, and his nostrils dilated like those of an angry animal. Bess was not looking at him or she would hardly have continued her taunting, jesting tone.

"You see, as you won't tell me anything. I just have to find out for myself, Abel. Oh, yes; you think I know nothing about the room with the double doors, and the strong lock that had to be put on in such a hurry!"

"What!"

He turned on her savagely, his face close to hers, and grasped her arm with such force that she cried out in sudden pain and alarm.

Her frightened face recalled him to himself. With a nervous laugh, he relaxed his hold.

Bess, white and trembling, had risen to her feet. He saw he would have some difficulty in reassuring her.

"What a cursed fool I am," he thought, "to betray myself like that! Of course, it was that idiot of a carpenter who spoke about mending the lock! I might have guessed it was impossible she could really know anything."

Meanwhile, he exerted himself to his utmost to make friends again—no difficult matter, after all.

"And now I must tell you, I suppose, why I was so angry," he said, when he had seen the color return once more to her cheeks. "The fact is, Mr. Langley would be awfully wild if he thought I had told you the secret of that room."

"Then there is a secret?" she exclaimed, breathlessly.

"Yes; but it's not such a grand secret, after all. You will laugh when you hear what it is. Mr. Langley has got a couple of foreign birds caged up there—great wild things they are, standing nearly as high as we do."

"But why does he keep them there? Won't they die, being shut up like that?" Bess asked, her eyes opening with astonishment.

"No; they are owls, you see—at least, something like owls, so they never want to go out in the daytime. We let them out now and again at night, and they make a fine noise then, I can tell you."

"But why should Mr. Langley make a secret of it, Abel?"

"Oh, because"—he hesitated a moment, at a loss what to say—only a moment, but it was a moment of enlightenment to Bess—"because if it came to the ears of the people who keep the Zoological Gardens in Philadelphia that there were two such valuable birds here at Normantown, they'd be wanting to have them; and Mr. Langley is very proud of them, and would be sorry to lose them. You will have to take care you say nothing about this to any one. If you do I'll never tell you anything again—remember that."

"Oh, I'll be sure not to tell a living soul!" the girl said confidently.

But when they had parted, and Bess was making her way home to the lodge along the little path which led through the wood, she gave a little exultant laugh to herself.

"I may be a fool," she thought, "but I'm not quite such a fool as he takes me for. A likely thing that I'm going to believe that about the foreign birds! Birds, indeed!—it's my opinion there's some one locked up in that room—some one as Mr. Langley keeps a prisoner. I don't know as it makes much odds where the money comes from, so long as we get it. To think that I'll be a lady one day!"

She stood for awhile, her head thrown back, her lithe young figure drawn up proudly, a smile of rapture on her lips, and her hands clasped together in ecstasy.

"And Abel shall never repent having chosen me; he shall see I'll look the lady, too. Folks will be seeing a grand carriage go by, ever so fast, with big black horses and silver read silver—on the harness; and there'll be a beautiful lady inside, all in white, with a pink parasol, like Mrs. Langley's; and she'll lean back against the cushions, all easy and careless-like,

as if she'd been used to it all her life; and she'll smile, ever so slightly, and bow like this." Bess, carried away by her own thoughts, suited the action to the word.

"And every one will say, 'Who is she? Who can she be?' And all the time it'll be me—Bess!"

Once more she laughed outright, and clapped her hands in delight.

"You seem to be very merry," some one said close behind her.

At the words she started and looked round sharply. Had she been speaking those words aloud? She could not remember. The face of the stranger reassured her; she showed no consciousness of having overheard.

She was a lady, young and handsome, with clear blue eyes and fair golden hair cut short and curling like a boy's. In that one swift glance Bess took in everything—the plain blue linen dress, trimmed with embroidery to match, the simple straw hat with its bouquet of field flowers, and the sunshade guiltless of ornament.

"When I'm a lady," she thought, contemptuously, "I'll dress better than that."

"Can you tell me if this is the way to Normanton Hall?" the stranger asked, regarding her with rather an amused expression in her bright eyes.

"Yes, you'll get to it in this way if you walk straight on." She would have said "miss" a few weeks ago, but lately Bess had taken to dropping such little marks of civility. "The path will take you out of the wood and into the drive itself. You will see the house plainly from there."

With a brief "Thank you," the lady passed on.

Bess stood looking after her curiously.

"Now, I'd like to know who she is," she said to herself. "I don't believe that I've seen her about here before. And why does she come through the wood instead of by the road? Ah, I have it. She's stopping at The Grange, I suppose, with Mrs. Brereton, and she's crossed the river in the boat. The colonel and his wife used to come that way, I remember, in the old Squire's time. If she's a friend of Mrs. Langley's, she's the first ever I've seen since they've been here. I doubt whether she'll be made welcome. There's not a soul's been at the house but Mrs. Mellor, the doctor's wife, since the baby was born, and that's nearly a month ago."

She left the wood soon, and came out on the broad, white carriage drive, where she paused once more.

"Ay, there she goes," she murmured, "through the last gate and across the lawn. Now she's by the door. I wonder will they let her in? Yes, there's the door open, and she's gone in. I'll ask Abel about her to-morrow; not that I'm likely to get much out of him, though."

Just then the big clock over the Hall stables struck five.

"My word! who ever'd have thought 'twas so late!" cried Bess, in consternation. "Granny'll be angry with me for being off most all the afternoon like this."

She turned her back upon the Hall, and set off running as fast as she could in the direction of the lodge.

CHAPTER IV.

A FATAL STEP.

MRS. LANGLEY had not been at all strong since her baby was born, though she had for some days insisted that she was well enough, and had left her room and come down-stairs as usual.

She looked terribly pale and thin. There were deep hollows in the once rounded cheeks; and the dark eyes, unnaturally large now, had a wistful, startled look in them that was inexpressibly painful to see.

Doctor Mellor was puzzled, and did not know what to make of her. Many a long talk did he and his good old wife have about her.

"She would be so much better if only we

could get her away from this place," he said. "You succeeded so well before, Mary; don't you think you could persuade her to go to the sea-side for a couple of months? I can't get her to listen to me."

Of course Mrs. Mellor promised to do her best, and the very next day she went to the Hall and broached the subject; but this time she was not successful.

Mrs. Langley listened to all she had to say with that listless apathy which was becoming so natural to her, then refused firmly and decidedly to leave Normanton even for a week.

So Mrs. Mellor took her leave, and started back for the village, feeling sad and dispirited, for she had taken a great fancy to her husband's patient, and it pained and grieved her inexpressibly to see the poor girl fading away, as it were, before their very eyes.

Not far from the house she came upon Mr. Langley, walking slowly up and down the drive. His head was bent, his eyes on the ground.

His wife had seemed unhappy enough; but there was a set look of misery and despair on his face that made the old lady long to stop and say something to comfort him.

But he never saw her—never once raised his head, only walked on mechanically, like a man walking in his sleep.

"What is it that is wrong with them?" she asked herself, almost impatiently, as she passed on. "I dare say it is nothing more or less than some foolish quarrel they have had, and each is too proud to be the first to own to being in the wrong. Oh, it makes me angry to think that two young people should spoil their lives in this way!"

But there was more sorrow than anger in her thoughts just then, and tears were glistening in her eyes.

No sooner did Mrs. Langley find herself alone than she sunk down on the nearest couch, and burying her face in the pillows, burst into a passionate flood of tears.

"Oh, why can't they let me alone!" she sobbed. "Why will they tempt me to leave this hateful place? Cannot they see how I am longing to go—how the thought that I must stay here is killing me?"

She endeavored to rise, and clasped her hands together tightly over her heart.

"The very air of this house stifles me. I seem to draw in poison at every breath. What have I done—oh, what have I done that I should be chosen for such a lot as this?"

Half-fainting, she fell back upon the pillow, where she lay for some time motionless, her face white as death, her eyes closed.

Had she really fainted, or was it only sleep that was stealing over her? She neither knew nor cared. Either was equally welcome to her then, for it brought with it a sense of rest and peace, a delicious unconsciousness, gradually numbing her faculties and lifting her, as it were, out of herself.

One by one, scenes from her past life floated before her as in a dream.

She was little May Sandford again, a happy, merry, light-hearted child, seated in the swing beneath the big pear-tree in Uncle Gregory's old-fashioned garden. What a dear old garden that was, with its high, close-clipped box hedges and many winding paths, its sweet-swalling cabbage roses and mignonette, and its borders of five o'clocks. As she swung to and fro, the soft breeze, laden with the scent of many flowers, met her, and lightly lifted the curls from her brow. When she went back she was almost hidden by the leaves of the pear-tree; when she flew forward again she could look straight over the box hedges at the houses beyond. Ah, yes, and there was old Patience, in her snow-white cap and apron, standing in the doorway beneath the honeysuckle covered porch! She was waving to her to come in. It must be six o'clock. Uncle Gregory would be waiting for her to pour out his tea.

Then that scene passed, and another appeared.

It was the same house, but she was no longer quite a child. The old pear-tree was leafless; the garden was covered with a smooth white shroud of snow; and a few naked stalks among the trellis-work of the porch were all that remained of the honeysuckle, for the summer had long since passed, and winter was come. Everything looked very, very dismal to May now, for it had been decided that she must go to school. Before the door a carriage was standing, with her trunks on the top. She was in the hall, with her arms clasped tightly round Uncle Gregory's neck, begging him, with tears streaming down her cheeks, not to send her from him. She could hear his voice now as he answered her. It trembled a little, and there was a suspicious moisture in his own eyes.

"My dear, you speak as if we were parting forever. What are six months, after all? They will soon pass, and you will be home again."

And that was the last time she saw him; yet Uncle Gregory was not dead. It was a fate crueler than death which parted them.

The six months passed, and she was not going home, for Uncle Gregory was abroad, and had written a letter full of regret and sympathy; but the bitter truth was there, clothed in tender, loving words. She was to spend the holidays in school.

She was in the shabby, ill-furnished school-room, standing disconsolately by the window, looking over the wire-blind at her more fortunate school-fellows as, one by one, with laughing eyes and happy faces, they took their departure.

What a real trouble that seemed to her, and how wretched she felt at the thought that she would be the only one left! But the door was flung open, and her dear, true friend, Kate Dunstable, came rushing in, waving a letter triumphantly in her hand. It was all settled at last; the letter had but just come. May was to go home with her to The Hollies. Half-laughing, half-crying, the two friends hurried up-stairs to pack. Soon they were being driven rapidly toward the station.

Those had been happy holidays. What with riding and driving, boating on the lake, and picnic parties, the six weeks passed like a pleasant dream. Soon she was back at the school again. She might have fancied she had never left it, were it not for Fred Dunstable's little emerald ring shining upon her hand. That ring troubled her. She had suffered Fred to place it on her finger; had almost promised—not now, of course, but some day far in the dim future—she would be his wife, and she was not quite sure that she loved him. But then she liked Fred very much; not, of course, quite so well as Uncle Gregory, nor Kate, nor perhaps old Patience, who had been like a mother to her, but next to these three, and it had been so hard to say no outright.

She was in church next, in one of the pews which belonged to the school. The organ pealed forth, and the evening hymn began; but the words trembled on her lips, and she scarcely dared look up from her book, for if she did so she knew she should meet the admiring gaze of a pair of dark, melancholy eyes, fixed upon her with a look of such yearning, pleading tenderness that her romantic heart was touched.

A letter was placed in her hand one day; Jane, the waitress had been bribed to deliver it. Instinctively May knew from whom it came. She stood deliberating, with the letter in her hand. Should she open it, or ought she not rather to take it at once to Miss Malcome? No; that would perhaps get Jane into trouble.

She hesitated a moment; then slowly broke the seal. Ah! what beautiful, poetic words it contained! She read them again and again. He loved her, this handsome stranger: loved her without having seen her more than half a dozen times, and without ever having exchanged one word with her!

Well, she had heard somewhere that love at first sight was the truest love; but he had no right to have written to her like that, and she knew she ought to be very angry. Of course

she was not going to answer the letter; only—only something ought to be done to prevent him sending her another. So she just wrote him two lines, in her round, school girl hand, telling him he must never attempt to do such a thing again.

But that did not stop the letters coming; perhaps she had almost hoped it would not. She was getting to care for him more than she dared own to herself. Meetings followed in the little summer-house at the bottom of the garden. He had to climb the orchard-wall to get there, and she had to steal twenty minutes from her study hour. Of course it was all very wrong—very wrong indeed; and what she most felt was not being able to take Kate into her confidence. But it was so delightfully romantic, and May believed she knew what it was really to love now.

When he asked her to be his wife, how could she refuse? She hardly thought it strange that he should wish the marriage to be a secret one. Was not an elopement the natural sequence to their romantic courtship? She would like Uncle Gregory and Patience to have been told, and perhaps Kate; but Kate might be indignant and angry with her for her brother's sake.

She could not bear for any one to be cross with her. She was to write to Uncle Gregory immediately after the marriage. He would be sure to forgive her. He could not be angry with her for long.

What a bright, clear morning it was when she turned her back for the last time on the school. Not a soul was stirring in the house. She had kissed Kate as she slept, then silently descended the stairs, unbarred the shutters, opened the low French windows, and stepped out onto the lawn, where the dewdrops glistened in the early morning sun. She was a little frightened; her heart was a little sore; but she forgot all when Marmaduke Langley took her in his arms and thanked and blessed her for her bravery and trust in him.

It was a dismal wedding—in a moldy old church somewhere in the suburbs. No one was present but the clergyman, the pew-opener and the verger. Not the sort of wedding she and Kate had so often talked of, where the bride would, of course, be in satin, and lace, and orange-blossoms, and be followed by a long train of bridesmaids. Now she stood by the altar in her old school frock of black alpaca. What could have tempted her to come away in that dress? It was so dreadfully unlucky to be married in black!

A chill dread crept over her—a foreboding of evil; the empty church struck so icy cold, and it smelt, like a vault! She glanced around, terror-stricken. If there had only been some friend near, she would have fled. But where could she go?—to whom could she fly? Ah, no; it was too late! The clergyman was already reading the service; she had mechanically spoken the fatal words; and Marmaduke, with a strange, exultant look in his eyes, had imprinted a husband's kiss upon her lips.

Oh, why was not Kate here to save her?—Kate, who was so strong, so sensible! The damp, moldy scent of the old church was in her nostrils; Marmaduke's arms held her in a vise-like clasp from which she could not escape. The clergyman stood passively aside—he would not help her.

A horrible darkness was spreading over the church; the distant aisles were in shadow; vague, indistinct, intangible forms—doubly awful because of their indistinctness—crept up out of the blackness. The air was full of them! They came nearer—nearer! Soon they would close in round her! Already their shroud-like, vapory garments almost touched her!

Her brain reeled; she could bear no more. She made one supreme effort to release herself, and shrieked out for help.

"Oh, Kate, save me! save me!"

With a wild cry, she opened her eyes.

Two arms were still encircling her; but they were loving arms, holding her fondly. Was that really Kate's face so near her own?—

Kate's dear eyes looking into hers with such tender solicitude? Surely, she must be dreaming still?

But no; here she was in her own drawing-room at Normanton, and it was indeed Kate's voice which spoke to her.

"My darling, it is I; tell me what it is that troubles you?"

She could not reply; she could only fall, weeping, on her friend's neck.

Just then the drawing-room door opened softly, and Mrs. Dexter came in with the teatray in her hands. Her step was so noiseless that neither of them heard her enter.

She put the tray down on a small table, and then stood looking at them suspiciously. "Abel did right to send me in," she thought.

"Mrs. Langley is capable of saying anything when she is in that mood."

"Perhaps you would like me to pour the tea out for you, ma'am, as you don't seem very well?" she said, blandly.

Her mistress started at her voice. How cruelly it recalled her to the present! She dried her eyes quickly, and endeavored to regain her composure.

"No, no, thank you, Mrs. Dexter. I will do it myself; I am better now."

"I am glad of that, ma'am; you know the doctor said it was very necessary you should keep perfectly quiet, and not excite yourself."

She smiled as she spoke—not a pleasant smile—and her eyes rested on Mrs. Langley with a glance that was full of meaning.

Lately, she had constituted herself a sort of maid to Mrs. Langley. The poor girl was anything but pleased by this arrangement, but she felt herself utterly powerless to raise any objection; probably it would have made no difference if she had. The consequence was that she was hardly ever from the woman's presence.

If she walked in the park, Mrs. Dexter would be sure to follow her soon with a shawl or a sunshade. Whenever Mrs. Mellor came to see her, Mrs. Dexter would bring in the afternoon tea, generally taking care to leave the door open when she went out again. At any moment she would come unexpectedly into the room on some pretext or other. There was no denying the fact, Mrs. Langley was spied upon—watched in her own house, and very closely watched too.

"I don't like that woman, May," Kate said, decidedly, when they were alone again. "You know I always flattered myself I was rather a judge of character. Who is she?"

May glanced nervously toward the door before she replied.

"She is the housekeeper; but she nursed me when baby was born, and she has waited on me since."

Kate had noticed the look, and wondered at it. May seemed strangely in awe of her servant.

"Oh, yes, I must see your baby; is she like you or Mr. Langley?"

"I—I don't know; like 'Duke, I think." Her face looked a shade paler, and it almost seemed as if she shuddered. "But never mind baby now; tell me about yourself. How did you find me out?"

"Oh, that was no very difficult matter. Mrs. Brereton is a sort of aunt of mine—at least, she is a cousin of papa. When she was staying with us in town this season she told me you were living here quite near her. Of course I was instantly seized with a great wish to come on a long visit to The Grange, though, as a rule, it is not a very lively house, my dear. Aunt Constance said that you denied yourself to all visitors, and that most likely you would not see me. But I am not like any ordinary visitor, am I? Say you are glad I am here, May."

"Yes, dear, I am glad; why should I not be?"

But there was a want of heartiness in May's tone, and that half-frightened look came into her eyes, which were filling with tears.

"May, what is wrong—what is it that has

changed you so? You are ill and unhappy. Oh, my dear, can't I help you?"

"No one can help me—no one!" Mrs. Langley whispered, with another quick glance toward the door. "Hush! say no more."

At the same time she placed her trembling hand over her friend's mouth, for the handle of the door turned slightly.

It was her husband who entered this time. He came forward with forced cheerfulness as May introduced him to her friend, and for some time they talked on general subjects; but the conversation flagged perceptibly, and there was constraint in the manner of all.

It seemed that Kate was to have no chance of seeing May alone. She rose to take her leave presently, feeling that the visit had altogether not been a satisfactory one. But she was not to be balked so easily. She was quite determined that she would see her again before long, and alone too.

"What! must you be going already?" May asked, somewhat feebly.

"Yes, dear; I promised Aunt Constance I would be back by six. But I think you said you had not been out all day. Why not come with me a little way?"

"Yes, I shall like it very much," May replied, quickly.

She had half-risen from her chair; but she sunk back again, and the words died from her lips, for she had met her husband's eyes fixed on her with a look of doubt and suspicion in them.

"He is afraid to trust me," she thought, bitterly; "he fears I may be tempted to say more than I ought. He should know me better than that. After all, what does it matter—what does anything matter now? Then aloud she added, "It looks very warm out; I dare say it will be wiser if I stay in the house."

Mr. Langley understood why she so suddenly changed her mind, and his heart smote him.

"You won't find it too warm in the wood, May, it is quite cool and shady beneath the trees," he said, laying his hand upon the bell. "I will ring for your hat."

He watched the two friends as they crossed the lawn, each with an arm around the other's waist. How often he had seen them walking just in the same way a year ago in the garden behind the school! May's step was more elastic then; her cheeks had the glow of health in them, and a smile was ever ready on her lips. It was seldom she smiled now.

"He turned away from the window with a groan; he could not bear to see her now, remembering what she was then. The change was too painful, and it had been his doing. Why had he not left her in peace?—why had he come into her life only to mar it?"

"I wonder you should let them go off like that alone."

It was Mrs. Dexter who spoke; she did not even make a pretense of civility when strangers were not present. She was standing close behind him, looking over his shoulder.

He did not resent her right to question him.

"Why should I not?" was all he said.

"Why? I should think you ought to know that best yourself. Here's this school friend of hers has turned up to whom she has likely been in the habit of confiding everything. What's to prevent her telling her all now?"

"She would not for my sake," Mr. Langley replied; but there was a want of confidence in his tone.

"Wouldn't she?" Mrs. Dexter laughed out loudly and coarsely. "Don't flatter yourself she cares for you, now that she knows the truth; 'tisn't in human nature she should. I told you how it would be when you came back that day and said you were married; didn't I?"

"You did," he replied, calmly—the calmness of despair. The same thought had been haunting him for some weeks. "But I loved her so! I had had so little happiness in my dreary life! Why should my life be one long sacrifice? Heaven knows I would have kept the truth from her if I could!"

"And so you sacrificed her—" Mrs. Dexter began. But he looked so wretched that even she thought it wiser to pursue the subject no further. "What can't be cured must be endured," she said, as she left the room. "But I'd keep an eye on that friend of hers, if I were you."

CHAPTER V.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

"You look tired, dear; let us rest here; it is delightfully cool by the water."

And Kate Dunstable sat down on the bank of the river, almost in the same place as Bess and Abel Dexter had chosen for their meeting an hour or so before.

May sunk down wearily beside her, and rested her head lovingly on her friend's shoulder.

"Oh, Kate, it is good to be with you again!" she sighed. "How I wish I could awake and find the last twelve months had been only a dream!"

"Then your marriage has not been a happy one, dear?" Kate said, very gently.

She did not want to force May's confidence; but she thought it would be a relief to her to speak.

"I did not say that, Kate. No, no; I am sure I did not say so!"

She looked behind her timidly, as if she feared some one might be lurking behind the trees.

"You did not say so, certainly; but, as a rule, if one is happy, one would rather that happiness were a reality than a dream."

"Ah, you are so clever. It is no use trying to deceive you; and it is true, Kate, I am not happy; I am very, very wretched!"

"He is not cruel to you, my poor child? Do not say that Mr. Langley is unkind to you!"

She drew the poor trembling girl nearer to her, as if to protect her from all danger.

"Unkind!" May exclaimed. "Duke unkind! Ah, how little you know him! He has never used one hard word to me since the day we were married. Kate, were you very angry, did you think very badly of me when you found I had gone away without one word?"

"I was very grieved, dear, to think you should not have taken me into your confidence; but I think, perhaps, I can guess at the reason. It was because of Fred, was it not?"

"Yes, partly. I thought naturally you would have been vexed with me on his account, for I did treat him very badly, I know that. How he must hate and despise me now!"

Kate preferred to ignore the latter part of her remark.

"It would have been kinder to have told him the truth at the time," she said. "And it was the truth that you did not love him; I felt sure of it from the first. You are so totally dissimilar in every way. Fred is so practical—so matter-of-fact. Mr. Langley is as romantic as yourself, I should say. Do you know, May, I have often wondered why he took so much trouble to meet you secretly and then run away with you, instead of getting your uncle's consent to your marriage, and being married in an orthodox way. He is a gentleman, and had just inherited this property. Mr. Sandford could hardly have objected to him."

"Perhaps uncle Gregory would have thought me too young," May stammered, "and 'Duke' wished there should be no delay; he was so afraid something might happen that would separate us. But oh, Kate! uncle Gregory has been so cruel to me, so very unkind! I know I had no right to act as I did after all his kindness to me; I know it was deceitful and wicked of me, but I fancied he loved me too well not to forgive me."

"And has he not?" Kate inquired, in surprise. "There must be some mistake—some extraordinary misunderstanding somewhere. I saw your uncle not very long ago. Let me see—it was last winter in St. Louis; we were all spending a few weeks there, and he was at

the same hotel. Papa knew him slightly, and when I heard who he was, you may be sure I was anxious to make his acquaintance for your sake."

The languid, apathetic expression passed from May's face. She laid her hand on her friend's arm and looked up eagerly into her face.

"And did he speak of me, Kate? Oh, tell me all he said."

"Yes, he did speak of you, but not until we had got to be quite friendly, and that took some little time. I think he took rather a fancy to me after a little bit."

"I am sure that it was no more than his duty to do so, considering that I never in all my life took so much trouble to please any one. I used to play cribbage with him of an evening sometimes; and now and then we would walk together around town. Oh, how tired I used to get of that monotonous, uninteresting stretch of pavement! And all this time he never once mentioned your name voluntarily."

"Well, I could stand it no longer, and we were going away in a day or two. I was determined to make him speak of you. You see, I had of course asked after you before, but I saw by his manner that the subject was a painful one."

"Ah, yes, I understand," May said, with a sigh. "He wishes to forget me. But go on, dear."

"We were sitting in one of the little glass-houses looking out over the sea. He had been silent for a long time. I felt sure he was thinking of you, and I made up my mind to speak. Then he told me all; how you had sent a letter to him on the day of your marriage begging him to forgive you; and how he had written back in the first burst of anger, saying he never wished to see you nor to speak to you again."

"Yes, it was a cruel letter," May said, "and it made me very miserable; yet I did not quite believe he really meant what he said. I fancied he would relent in time."

"And so he did. He told me he regretted it almost as soon as the letter was posted."

"Then why has he never taken any notice of any of the letters I have written to him since?"

"What! did you then really write to him again?" Kate cried, excitedly. "He never heard from you but that once; he told me so. He fancied that you could not forgive him for the harsh words he used in that first note. And though he has posted many and many a letter to you since, he had no reply to one. He believed you had quite ceased to love him."

"I can't understand it all," said May, in an awe-stricken tone. "Some one must have intercepted the letters. It must be—"

She paused abruptly, fearing to say more.

"After all," she added, thoughtfully, "it is far better Uncle Gregory should not come here. Yes; it could do no good. But I should like to send him just one line to say that I shall never forget him—that I love him as I always have—no, more; for I am more in need of love and sympathy than ever I was before. Kate, I may tell you this much. There is a wretched secret in my husband's life; a fearful secret, which I may never breathe to living soul. 'Duke' would have kept it from me if he could; for eleven months he succeeded; but just before my baby was born, I found it out quite by accident."

She shuddered as the recollection returned to her, and covered her face with her hands.

"And so you think it is your husband who has kept back your letters, and who wishes you to be entirely separated from your friends and relations, lest they, too, should discover it?"

"No; it is not 'Duke's' doing—at least, not entirely. I think it must be Mrs. Dexter or her son—perhaps both. Oh, Kate, how I hate them! I wonder if it is very wicked to hate people as I hate them? You have not seen Dexter yet. He is 'Duke's' valet, and I think I detest him more than his mother. You cannot think how insolent he is at times."

"Then why does Mr. Langley keep him?" inquired Kate, bewildered. "Why does he not send him away?"

"Because—oh, cannot you understand?—because he dare not!"

The words were scarcely uttered, when the ferns behind them were parted, and Dexter himself came leisurely forward, a fishing-basket slung across his shoulder, and a fishing-rod in his hand.

"Excuse me interrupting you, ma'am, but Mr. Langley told me, if I happened to come across you, to say he hoped you wouldn't stop out too long, for the dew will soon be rising."

There was a gleam of malice in his black eyes, which made both girls feel certain he had overheard, at any rate, part of their conversation; how much, it was impossible to say.

May trembled with apprehension; but Kate rose and regarded him defiantly. For a moment or two they stood looking at each other, distrust on the face of both. Kate's eyes were the first to waver and fall, for an expression of bold, undisguised admiration had come into his.

Such a look would have been an insult from any one; but from a man in his position—a servant!—it made her wish she were a man that she might strike him. A hot flush of indignation spread up to the roots of her fair hair. Perhaps he guessed something of her feelings; but, if such were the case, it did not appear to affect him in the very smallest degree. Kate fancied she heard him laugh softly to himself as he turned upon his heel, and moved off to where a turn in the river hid him from their sight.

"I am afraid you must go, dear," she said to May. "It is not safe for us to talk here; and if you remain longer, we shall be suspected. You are right about that man; he looks dangerous, and I mistrust him entirely."

"But we shall meet again—I shall see you again before long?" May pleaded.

"Yes; but I must think it all over and arrange something. In the meantime, write your letter to your uncle. Stay; you see that fallen willow, a little lower down, close to the water, not very far from where my boat is moored? There is a hollow in the trunk. If you can manage to get away unperceived tomorrow morning, come here early and place the letter there. I will go and fetch it some time in the day, and it shall be posted the same evening."

"Dear Kate, you are a true friend! How I wish I could tell you all; but I dare not, for the secret is not my own."

"Yes—yes, I quite understand; do not let that trouble you. Poor little May! I would give a great deal to be able to help you—to make you look a little more like what you used to be in the old days. And now good-by. We shall soon meet again, never fear."

Kate stood looking after her until she had reached the little path leading to the drive; then, with a sigh, she turned and walked quickly to where the boat was fastened.

Not a dozen yards from it stood Abel Dexter fishing.

Of course there was nothing against his being there. He had more right there than she had.

Yet Kate felt angry; she believed he had chosen that spot only because it was there she must cross the river.

Turning her back upon him, she hurriedly began trying to unloosen the knots in the rope which secured the boat to the trunk of a tree. The old proverb of "more haste, less speed," was never truer than then; for the more she pulled and tugged away at the cord the tighter it became. Surely she never tied it so firmly as this herself!

Abel laid down his fishing-rod and came toward her. She heard his step approaching. What would she not have given then for a knife? Sinking on her knees on the damp ground, she tried to loosen the stubborn knots with her teeth. Not a dignified attitude for a young lady; but Kate was desperate.

"Perhaps I can do it for you," he said: "won't you let me try?"

What did he mean by speaking to her in that tone—almost as if he considered himself an equal?

"No, thank you; I can manage it quite well myself," Kate replied, haughtily—that is, as haughtily as she could under the circumstances.

It was not very easy to look haughty and dignified kneeling there among the river sedges.

Abel went leisurely back to his place and resumed his fishing.

For ten minutes more she worked away bravely, till her fingers ached and her teeth felt loose. Still the knot was as tight as ever.

A large drop of rain splashed down upon her hand; then another. The sky had become overcast; there was evidently going to be a heavy storm.

Abel drew in his line and put up his fishing-tackle. He was going away. Soon he would pass her. If he offered to help her now she would not refuse.

But he did not offer; he did not even glance in her direction. She rose to her feet; there was no help for it, she must speak to him or go back to the Hall for assistance.

"Do you happen to have a knife with you?" she asked, with assumed carelessness, as if the idea had but just occurred to her.

He pretended not to hear her. She had to repeat her question; then he stopped, a slight smile of quiet amusement on his lips, infinitely more irritating than words could have been. Taking a knife from his pocket, he opened it and handed it to her.

Kate took it and cut away the rope almost savagely, fully conscious that he was watching her with that disagreeable smile still on his lips. Soon the boat was free, and she was rowing vigorously across the river.

It was raining hard now. She was not sorry, when she had landed and was walking quickly toward the house, to see some one coming toward her with an umbrella and shawl.

When she came nearer, to her surprise she saw it was her brother Fred. Her heart gave a sudden bound and then seemed to stand still, for she guessed at once that something must be wrong at home and he had come to fetch her. Her little sister had not been well when she last heard from home; perhaps she was worse—seriously ill!

"Oh, Fred!" she cried, running up to him and clasping her hands over his arm, "what is it—is anything the matter?"

"My dear girl, if you get so excited before you hear a word, how shall I be able to tell you?"

He stooped and kissed her; then, unfolding the shawl, wrapped it round her.

"Don't keep me in suspense, please, Fred! Is it Dora?"

"Yes, it is Dora," he replied, gravely. "She has the scarlet fever. We all thought it wiser that you should not come home; but she was not so well last night, and she asked for you, and so—"

"And so you have come for me. It was cruel not to have told me the truth from the first. There could be no danger for me, for I have had the fever. Please walk faster; we must start immediately."

"No; certainly not!" he said, decidedly. "You are out of breath already. There is not a train for more than an hour, and we shall not take twenty minutes driving to the station. You will have plenty of time to change your wet clothes and get something to eat. Remember, we have a long journey before us, and you will need all your strength when you arrive."

Perhaps it was not very surprising, with so much to think of and trouble her, that Kate forgot all about May. It was not until she and Fred were in the train that she remembered her promise about the letter.

They were just passing Normanton. The red chimneys of the old Hall could be seen

above the trees. It was that which reminded her.

What would poor May think of her going away without any explanation?

Of course she could write as soon as she got home, but it was more than doubtful whether the letter would ever be allowed to reach the person for whom it was intended.

In her dilemma she could think of nothing better than asking her brother's advice. In a few words as possible she told him of her interview with Mrs. Langley.

She was a little surprised at the way in which he received her news. She had never seen Fred so excited before. She had fancied it was possible he might care for May still, but she did not know how much until now.

When the first flush of anger had faded from his face, it left him deathly pale.

"I shall sift this to the bottom, Kate," he said firmly. "Who knows what horrible crime this man may not have committed? Is she to be always kept a prisoner in her own house—watched, insulted, and intimidated by her own servants? Is her life to be sacrificed for his? Good Heaven! to think that I should have lost her for this!"

"But, Fred," his sister interposed, gently, "remember, whatever Mr. Langley may have been guilty of, he is her husband. Do you imagine that May would thank you for dragging this wretched secret to light? Though it may cost her much, she is as anxious as he is to hide the truth."

"Kate," he said, bending forward, the better to see how she received his words, and speaking in a low, concentrated voice, "who can say but he may have been already married when he tempted May to elope with him? Perhaps she is not really his wife."

There were beads of perspiration on his brow as he concluded, and the hand which in his eagerness he had laid on hers trembled perceptibly; but she had no pity for him. She shook off the hand angrily, and her eyes flashed upon him indignantly.

"And you can think this of her—of the woman you pretended to love! Do you believe May capable, once she had learnt the truth, of staying one hour longer beneath his roof?"

"Forgive me, Kate!" he said despondently. "I don't think I quite know what I am saying."

"And all this time you are not helping me. You say nothing of how that letter is to be got from the trunk of the willow."

"I see no other way than going to fetch it."

"You! Do you mean that you will go back to Normanton for it?"

"Yes; if Dora is better, I will return by the first train. If the letter is left there, it may fall into somebody else's hands."

But more than the wish to get the letter was the desire to be near May, to be ready to save and protect her in case of need.

CHAPTER VI.

TWO SCHEMERS.

OLD Mrs. Pearson had spoken no more than the truth when she described Mrs. Dexter's sitting-room as being "fit for any fine lady." The carpet was of the richest and softest; the chair-coverings and window-hangings of delicately tinted satin brocade; valuable pictures—the greatest gems of the old Squire's collection—adorned the walls; while the cabinets contained old china and ornaments so costly that the former mistress of Normanton had suffered no one to touch them but herself, dusting them always with her own fair hand.

Abel had had this room prepared for his mother under his own especial supervision, and it did him credit.

Mrs. Dexter was seated before a small table, on which was a quantity of lace, yellow with age. She had been a lady's-maid at one time, and had had too much to do with lace not to fully understand and appreciate its value.

A smile of satisfaction came into her face as she handled it, for of its costliness there could be no doubt.

Abel came in presently, looking tired and cross. He flung himself down heavily on one of the couches, never heeding that his dirty boots left a mark on the satin cushion.

Mrs. Dexter loved her son; perhaps he occupied the one soft spot in her heart. Going up to him, she laid her hand caressingly on his forehead.

"It aches, dear, I know," she said—her voice always took a softer tone when she addressed him. "Shall I fetch you some eau-de-Cologne?"

He jerked his head away from her impatiently.

"For goodness sake, mother, leave me in peace. Can't you see I am fagged to death and worried, and want to be let alone? You ought to know by this time that I hate being fawned upon. If you want to be of use, get me a glass of brandy and soda."

"Oh, Abel!" she remonstrated. "You almost promised me yesterday you would try and leave off this evil habit. It is growing on you, dear, or I wouldn't speak. Remember what came of it last month. If you had been quite yourself, you would never have forgotten to draw the heavy bolt of that door, and Mrs. Langley would have learned nothing to this day."

"Are you going to bring all that up again? You are forever dinning it into my ears."

"I wouldn't speak of it, my boy, but for the sake of getting you to let the brandy alone."

"What else can a fellow do but drink during this infernally hot weather?" he retorted. "But there, mother, just get it me now, there's a good soul; my throat is parched with thirst. One glass won't hurt me."

With a sigh, she rose and did as he bade her. As a child she had indulged and spoilt him, refusing him nothing which it was in her power to give him; now that he had grown to be a man, he tyrannized over her. She had brought it on herself and received her fate uncomplainingly. She was so proud of her handsome, gentlemanly son; she was willing to be his slave, even, if that would give him pleasure.

When she had received the empty glass from his hands she went back to her place and began sorting and folding the lace.

"What is it you have got there?" he asked.

"Some lace, dear; they are beautiful, and worth quite a little fortune. I found them in the old wardrobe; such a quantity, too!"

"So you have been at your old games?" he cried, rising and regarding her angrily. "Didn't I tell you I'd have you take nothing more?"

"Nonsense, Abel; I only take what was in the house when we came. I don't believe Mrs. Langley has a notion of half what is here. I found the inventory, and have got it myself, put away safely. It is but anticipating things a little, anyway," she added, with a laugh. "I suppose you won't grudge me these bits of things when they come to you?"

"I am sick to death of it all," he said, with a frown. "Sometimes I think it would be wiser to throw the whole business up, and go off with what we have got."

"Abel!" Mrs. Dexter looked at him in blank dismay; and the flounce of Brussels point which she was in the act of folding, fell from her hands to the ground! "You must be mad! What! go away and give up all chance of being the master of Normanton?"

"I think it is more than doubtful I shall ever be that," he replied, gloomily.

"You seem to forget the will, duly signed and witnessed, made six months ago, on the very day before we came here."

"What is to prevent his making another?"

"He cannot!" Mrs. Dexter exclaimed, triumphantly; "for we could soon prove it was no better than waste paper!"

"We could, certainly; but that wouldn't help us," Abel rejoined, sharply; her confidence irritated him. "Would you like to know what he said to me not an hour ago?"

he inquired, looking up at her from under his black brows. "I suppose I had angered him, and put him out of patience. 'Take care, Dexter,' he said; 'you may go too far. A little more, and I will risk everything and give myself up.'"

"He never said that?" cried his mother.

"He did; and, what is more, I believe he meant what he said, too. I have noticed a change in him lately—a change I don't like. Since his little fool of a wife has been in the secret, he hasn't been the same man. He knows that she fears him now more than loves him; and he can't help seeing how ill and wretched she is. My opinion is he will disappear one of these fine days if we don't keep a pretty sharp look-out after him."

"That would spoil everything with a vengeance," his mother said, thoughtfully. "It would be hard to give up all, just as it seems within our grasp. But don't be in a hurry, Abel; you may be wrong. He is such a coward, I believe he will put up with anything sooner than let the truth be known. I can't see Normanton slip through our fingers without making one effort to keep it. After all, my boy, it should have been yours by right. It will be no more than justice for you to reign here as master."

"And, in the mean time, I am nothing but a servant!" he remarked bitterly. "And I've got to endure the haughty sneers and superior airs of girls who would be glad enough to be my wife if I were master here instead of valet."

"Never mind, dear; all that will be changed when that time comes."

"Yes, *when* it comes! It's only your nervous silliness that keeps it back now. What does that fellow Marks want here? He is coming up to the window—like his impudence!"

"What do you want, Marks? I told you, only the other day, that if you wanted to see me, you could come to the front door and ask to speak to me."

"It's only a half-dozen of sparrers, Mr. Dexter, as I've been and trapped for your owls," the gardener said, handing the birds in at the window.

"Then why the devil do you bring them here? Just take them round to the kitchen and give them to the cook, will you? If I want them I will get them. But it's not at all likely, for I mean to let the birds out to-night to forage for themselves."

The man was turning away, but at Abel's words he stopped and looked at him imploringly.

"Oh! sir, I do hope as you don't mean that! I do hope as you won't let 'em out to-night of all nights. My poor old woman is took worse."

He paused and rubbed his coat-sleeve across his eyes.

"What on earth has all this to do with me?" Abel asked, irritably.

"Well, you see, sir, I got them sparrers only because I thought they'd keep the dratted birds quiet. And now, if you go and let one on 'em out, Polly'll not get a wink of sleep the livelong night. Now, if you must let 'em out, couldn't you let the two loose for once? Maybe they then wouldn't make such a row. It's the one as is still shut up makes such a screaming, a-crying for its mate."

It was a long speech for old Marks to make. Few of the servants ever ventured to remonstrate with Abel Dexter.

"Have you quite done?" Abel asked, in ill-suppressed rage. He had been longing for something on which to vent his bad temper for some time.

"Yes, sir; I don't know as I've anything else to say."

Mark's voice had grown very despondent—he knew his mission had failed.

"Then be off with you and go on with your digging; and remember, I am not one to stand being dictated to. Do you think I shall consult your wishes as to whether I let the birds out or not? Let me hear no more of this. If you don't find the situation at the cottage to your liking, you can leave it. There's many a

man would be only too glad to have your place; and I don't know but we should be the gainers by the change."

"I am sure I didn't mean that, Mr. Dexter; and I wouldn't have spoken as I did if I'd thought 'twould have angered you. I meant no offense; but Polly, she begged me to do my best. She's nervous, you see, and the cries them birds gives is enough to frighten a timid thing like her—it's so awful human."

Marks turned away, very sore at heart.

He was an old man, and his wife was slowly dying. He could not risk being turned out of his situation at such a time.

When he was gone Mrs. Dexter carefully closed the window, and then cast an anxious look of inquiry upon her son.

"Did you mean what you said, Abel? Will the bird have to be let loose to-night?"

"Yes, I think so; it will be safest, anyway. One never knows what may happen. If I am not greatly mistaken, we shall have a bad time of it."

"I am always so anxious about you, my boy, at these times," she said, with a deep sigh. "I would almost as soon trust you in a den of wild beasts as see you enter that hateful room!"

"And yet you won't let me have my own way," he rejoined, sullenly. "How long is this to go on, I should like to know? Mother, I am growing desperate. I shall leave the door unbolted to-night; I will put it off no longer. We have agreed that it shall be done, sooner or later. What is the use of delaying?"

"No, no; not that, Abel! We might be murdered in our beds!"

She clung to him, trembling in every limb, her eyes wide open in terror.

He pushed her from him roughly. She had to take hold of the back of a chair to prevent herself from falling. A contemptuous sneer curled the corner of his thin lips as he regarded her.

"What a coward you are, mother!" he cried, scornfully. "All my life you have led me to believe that Normanton shall be mine. We have waited long enough, as you know, to come here. I thought the old Squire was never going to die; and, even then, six months were wasted, what with repairing the place, and one thing and another. Now, when there is nothing more to be done, and I say that the finishing touch must be put to what we have both been planning and plotting for all these years, you shrink from it."

Mrs. Dexter covered her face with both hands; her whole frame shook with emotion, which she vainly strove to conquer.

"Have you so easily forgotten your own wrongs, and how you swore you would one day have your revenge, and see me righted? Mother, I am ashamed of you; I thought you would have had more spirit."

Her hands dropped helplessly to her side. She was white to the lips, and her voice was but little above a whisper.

"Do as you will, Abel; I will say no more. Only don't let it be this time. If it must be, let it be when I am away from here. I will go to New York when the time comes."

"Perhaps it would be better. You are so weak. If you were here, very likely you would say or do something that would betray us. Yes, I see it would be wiser you should not be here. I can manage best alone."

"Don't speak like that, Abel; you talk as if you were going to do it yourself!" she exclaimed, with a shudder. "Remember, it won't be your doing, whatever happens!"

"No; it won't be my doing," he rejoined, with a short laugh; "but I shall be obliging enough to give the opportunity."

His mother did not join in the laugh; even she felt something like horror at his treating such a subject lightly. She was leaving the room, when he called her back.

"Where are you going now?" he asked, authoritatively. He seemed to enjoy the petty tyranny which he exercised over her.

"I was going to look for Mrs. Langley," she replied, meekly. "I haven't seen her for over an hour. Goodness knows what she is up to! I was so taken up with this lace, and then with talking with you, that I forgot all about her."

"Well, you can come back and look over your precious laces a little longer, if you like. Luckily, I don't trust everything to you. She was off to the wood long ago."

"Good gracious, Abel! Why didn't you tell me as soon as you came in? I must go after her at once. She will be meeting that Miss Dunstable there, who is stopping at Colonel Brereton's. The Grange grounds are only divided from ours by the river, you know."

"Exactly; but you see I have already sent her husband after her. Oh, he saves me a lot of trouble, I can tell you."

While this little scene had been taking place in Mrs. Dexter's room, May had made her way through the wood, taking the direction of the river.

The precious letter was in her pocket. In a few minutes more it would be safe in the trunk of the fallen tree, and by to-morrow uncle Gregory would know that she had never for a moment ceased to love him.

Her heart beat fast, and the unusual exercise brought a faint flush to her cheeks. She believed she had left the house quite unobserved; but before she had gone far, the sound of rapid footsteps behind her made her turn round in sudden alarm.

The next moment she was face to face with Mr. Langley.

"I thought perhaps you would let me come with you, May, if you are going for a walk," he said, hesitatingly. "We see so little of each other now."

His eyes fell beneath her mournful look of reproach, and the color spread over his face. He knew intuitively she had divined his reason for following her.

"You are afraid to trust me alone, 'Duke,' she said, sadly. "Is it always to be like this? Am I always to be watched and followed?"

"Heaven knows I meant to trust you!" he cried, wildly. "When some demon thought has tempted me to doubt you I have tried to put it from me. I believed you loved me too much to betray me; but your love has turned to horror and loathing. Ah, yes, you cannot deny it! You shrink from me even as I speak."

"'Duke—'Duke, you don't know what you are saying! Why should I hate you?"

"Is there not reason enough? Have I not sufficient proof, if proof were needed?"

He came nearer to her, bending till his hot breath was in her face.

"Listen," he said, his voice hoarse and unnatural. "You thought you were alone just now when you wrote the letter; but you were not. I was in the room, hidden by the window curtain. I had not gone there to spy upon you. I wished for nothing more than to be near you; to breathe the same air as you did; to see your dear eyes without that look of terror in them which my presence always brings. It was reward enough for me if your dress but touched me in passing. I was so near, I need but have put out my arms to have clasped you to my heart; but I stifled the wild longing that was in me, as I have stifled it so often of late. Then I saw you take paper and envelope and write the words which are to bring my ruin. That letter is in your pocket now! Ah, you tremble! It is true; I have found you out. You were to meet your friend here and give it to her, no doubt. In a few days my cousin would have learnt all, and I should be taken from you, a prisoner!—betrayed by my wife—the only being in this whole world whom I love!"

May had cowered from him, a look of fright in her distended eyes; but now she started forward, her arms outstretched, forgetting her fear in pity for his great agony.

"No, no; you are wrong. See, you shall read the letter yourself: it is not to your cousin. Oh, 'Duke, how could you think me capable of that!"

With trembling fingers, she tore open the envelope and held the sheet of paper before him.

"Look; there is no word here that could betray you. I only wanted to let uncle Gregory know that I had not forgotten him. I said there were reasons why we might never meet again; but that he must not think I had ceased to love him."

Her voice shook, and large tears rolled down her pale cheeks.

"There! I will tear it up. It shall not go at all. What does it matter? One day all things will be known. Life is so short."

As the pieces of paper fell fluttering to the ground, involuntarily her eyes were raised to the blue sky above, with a look of yearning, weary longing.

Her husband gazed at her spell-bound. How frail and weak she looked! He had never fully realized how ill and changed she was until now. Was she going to die? If so, it would be his doing—he would have killed her!

He staggered back against a tree, covering his eyes with his hands. He wanted to think. It had come to this; he must choose between his life and hers.

Ah, but if his were the sacrifice, he would have to give up more than life itself. How could he live away from her? If only they could *die* together—he, she, and the child! Surely that would be the best way of putting an end to all their troubles? It would be so sweet to die like that. No one could part them then!

He wondered how it had been possible that the idea had never occurred to him before. Now that the glorious thought had come, he seized it eagerly, gladly—gloating over it. He could almost laugh out in his joy to think how soon they would all be free.

But the look of exultation faded from his face; in its place came the old expression of hopeless melancholy.

It was the sight of Abel Dexter coming toward them which caused the change.

Mr. Langley's eyes sought the ground as the valet drew near, fearful lest they should betray the thoughts which were passing in his mind.

Dexter was very clever; it was seldom he trusted him for long out of his sight. But—who could tell!—the time might come. He must be very wary; he would watch and wait.

CHAPTER VII.

A VILLAIN'S POLICY.

"I've come to ask if you'd mind looking in on my old woman to-night, Mrs. Pearson," Marks, the gardener, said, putting his head in at the lodge door.

"What! is she worse again, John? Well, well, it's a hard life for some of us. Come in, do; and tell us all about it. It's lucky we're up; we're in bed most nights afore this; but I had some ironing to finish."

"And I wouldn't have come at such a time, but she's going, poor thing—she's going fast. There's not bite nor sup has passed her mouth this blessed day!"

He shook his head dejectedly as he sunk wearily into the chair which the old woman pushed toward him.

"I feel strange and lonely-like when I think of there being only her and me in the cottage. I'd take it kindly if you'd come and watch with me to-night. You're more used to sick folks than I am, and you and she was always friends."

"And that's true enough," she replied, her thoughts going back to the time when she and little Polly had played together on the village green; "we was fast friends, Polly and I, ever since we was little more than babies. I'll come with you, John, now at once, and welcome; but I'm afraid 't isn't much any of us can do for her."

She reached for her bonnet and shawl, which were hanging on a peg behind the door.

"Bess," she called, looking toward an inner room, "I'm off to John Marks's cottage to

nurse his sick wife. Maybe I'll not be back till morning."

Bess appeared in the doorway, a brush in her hand, and her red-brown hair loose and falling in pretty waves and curls all over her shoulder. Bess spent most of her spare time in the little closet she called her bedroom, before the square of cracked looking-glass, brushing and combing her beautiful hair. This evening she had been amusing herself by arranging it as Mrs. Langley did hers, smiling complacently at her own reflection as she acknowledged to herself, with a flush of triumph and gratified vanity, that she was prettier—yes, a hundred times prettier—than the lady up at the Hall! She had but just time to pull it down when her granddaughter called her.

"So your wife's worse, is she, Mr. Marks?" she asked, somewhat carelessly.

Bess thought too much of her own little worries to have much feeling for other people's troubles.

"Yes, she is, Bess," replied the gardener; "and Abel Dexter—out of pure contrariness I do believe—has chosen this night of all nights to let them blessed owls of his out—leastways, it's one as is out and one in. Between the two of them screeching, she'll be worse still afore the morning."

"Owls," she cried, eagerly; "then there really are owls at Normanton Hall?"

"Not much doubt of that, my girl; I should have thought you'd have heard them from here."

"Then Abel was telling me the truth, after all!" she thought. "But it's no secret. He was only making a fool of me when he said that. He thinks I'm just a silly, ignorant girl that will swallow any trash he likes to tell me. I'd pay him for that, yet. Maybe there's more in those owls than folks think of. I don't see what a couple of birds wants with two doors to their room—and strong locks, too!"

"We'd better be going, Mrs. Pearson, if you're ready," said Marks. "I promised Polly I wouldn't be away long."

"Poor thing! yes, let us be off. Good-night, Bess. I mayn't be able to get back till after daylight; but you can leave the door unbolted on the chance."

"All right, Granny; and I'll have the fire lighted early and a cup of tea ready for you when you do come."

"Ah, she's a good girl, John," said the old woman, proudly, as she left the lodge with her companion—"a good and a pretty as one would wish to see; a bit fond of pleasure and finery, I don't deny—what girl isn't? But she's fond of her old Granny, too; and her heart is in the right place."

Marks thought it wiser to make no reply to this. He had heard one or two tales he didn't like about the girl lately, and he knew something of her frequent meetings with Abel Dexter; but he was not going to grieve her grandmother by telling her of this. Let her keep faith in Bess as long as she can; she will know soon enough. How he wished later on that he had had the courage to speak!

Meanwhile, Bess was standing with her shapely arms folded, leaning in her favorite attitude over the garden gate. The moon was at the full; the night bright, clear and peaceful.

She was looking out dreamily over the park where the moon was shining through the trees, making the dewdrops sparkle like diamonds. She had no thought for the rare beauty of the scene; she was only saying to herself if those sparkling, glittering drops were real gems, how she would gather them by thousands and be rich—richer even than Abel could ever make her.

The cuckoo clock within the cottage behind her jerked out the hour in shrill, unmusical tones. She counted the strokes—eleven! She had no idea it was so late as that. Yet she was not at all sleepy; if she went to bed she should not close her eyes, she knew.

Hark! what was that?

The sound, though only faintly borne to her

on the breeze, made her start back in alarm, it was so wild and unearthly. The next moment she laughed at herself. It was but the cry of the owls, of course.

Were these birds so big and fierce as Abel had pretended, she wondered! She would very much like to have a look at them. What was to prevent her getting her hat and walking toward the Hall? No one could see her if she kept in the shade, even if there were any one still up; but, as a rule, the whole household had retired and the house shut up for the night before this.

The idea no sooner suggested itself than she hastened to act upon it. Soon she was stepping swiftly but cautiously along the narrow footpath that skirted the drive.

Weird shadows stretched across her path, cast by the gaunt, twisted branches of the tall trees. Now and then she would stop suddenly, her heart beating fast as her eyes fell upon some dead, barkless trunk or fallen tree whose sharp outlines took almost human shape in the uncertain light. Then she would summon up all her courage and hurry past it, glancing at it fearfully the while.

She could not say what it was that made her so anxious to proceed. Something seemed to compel her to advance. Soon the stately walls of the old Hall rose before her, its tall chimneys standing out in sharp relief against the deep blue of the cloudless sky.

This part of the house was in shadow, and no light glimmered in any of the windows. Bess did not pause here, for the cry of the birds, which had been almost continuous, came from the back. Sometimes it was low and plaintive; then suddenly it would rise to a shriek like the demoniacal laugh of a madman.

No wonder poor, nervous old Polly Marks found it impossible to sleep with such hideous sounds rending the air.

Keeping well out of the moonlight, and close to the hedge which bordered the terrace, Bess crept round to the other side of the building. A light was burning in one of the rooms here, and the blind was not drawn.

She could see Mrs. Langley, clad in a long white wrapper, her dark hair streaming far below her waist, walking agitatedly up and down.

Bess knew the baby was weak and sickly; she was kept awake by it, perhaps. Ah, yes; now she paused beside the cot, bending over it solicitously, and weeping and wringing her hands; then she would place her fingers on her ears, as if to shut out some dreaded sound.

She, too, apparently, was upset by the shrieking of the owls. Why, then, were they kept here?

It was a question Bess could not answer at all satisfactorily; yet she felt convinced there was some reason for it, some hidden mystery in all this that she was resolved to fathom.

While she was pondering on it, one of the birds swooped down past her—so near, that it almost touched her as it beat the air with its heavy wings.

It had come from an upper window, the window of the room with the double doors; she remembered it well. The sash was wide open, and on the narrow ledge sat the captive owl, chained by the leg, flapping its wings, and uttering the most dismal cries.

But stay; surely that was another cry from within!

Bess strained her ears to listen. Yes, there it was again. A cry more wild, more fearful, more human than the others. What did it mean? Abel and Marks had both spoken of two owls, and only two. Of these one was still in the park, the other she saw above her. What was it that had given that unearthly yell?

She trembled with fear as she crouched there among the bushes, her white face uplifted, her strained eyes fixed on that little upper window. Yet, even then, her curiosity was quickly mastering her fear. She was rapidly revolving in her mind the possibility of getting near enough

to look into the room. She would never, perhaps, have such a chance as this again; she must make the most of the opportunity now.

There was a tree growing near the house; its boughs reached to that very window. She remembered, on the night when she had slept there, how frightened she had been by the branches tapping against the pane. If only she could manage to climb it, her object would be gained.

Bess was a good climber; only a few weeks ago she had gone to the very top of her grandmother's biggest apple-tree in search of a bird's nest. This would be a rather more difficult feat; but she thought she could do it. She was ready to attempt harder things than that to discover the meaning of that third mysterious cry.

Abel had thought her silly and gullible, had he? Well, he should see; by to-morrow, perhaps, he might see cause to change his opinion. She would be able to make him do just what she liked, once she had found out this secret of his.

Knotted roots of ivy encircling the trunk of the tree offered uncertain footholds here and there; but notwithstanding this, Bess found it no easy matter to ascend the first few feet. However, after two or three attempts, she at length accomplished this, and once she had reached the part from which the branches sprung, she was not many minutes climbing to the desired height.

Her frock was torn in several places, and her hands were scratched and bleeding; but what of that? She neither heeded the one nor felt the other, for was she not on a level with the very window itself?

The owl, frightened at her near neighborhood, crept to the further corner of the ledge, thus enabling her more space to look within.

At first she could see nothing; the floor was some distance below the window, and only a small portion of the room was lighted by the moon. But, as she looked, something crept out from the darkness, and stood in that streak of moonlight.

Her breath came fast. For a moment she had to close her eyes in order to give herself time to recover from a sudden giddiness which had seized her.

When she looked again the figure had turned toward her. Oh, the horror of that ghastly, ashen face upraised to hers! No wonder she had to cling with all her strength to the bough to prevent herself from falling. The eyes, protruding and bloodshot, seemed to fix her with their fearful stare; both arms were stretched out toward her, the hands open and the fingers curved, as if to clutch at her. And then that horrible laughter rung out once more, peal after peal, soulless and awful in its utter mirthlessness.

Bess never quite knew how she came down from the tree, for before she had descended two-thirds of it she grew faint, her head swam, her hands relaxed their hold, and she fell heavily to the ground.

For a time she was unconscious. When she came to herself she was lying on the grass, bruised and aching in every limb, but, fortunately, not seriously hurt.

The first thing that she realized was that some one was supporting her head. Almost at the same time came the recollection of what she had seen. With a scream, she endeavored to rise, believing she was in the grasp of the fearful being who had so alarmed her.

She was a little reassured, though not altogether so, when she looked up and saw Abel Dexter's stern face bending over her, his dark eyes blacker than ever for the suppressed anger that lurked in their depths.

She had known that he would be angry when he learned that she had foiled him, and found out what he meant to keep from her; and she had meant, notwithstanding, to tell him of the discovery she had made; yet now when he knelt beside her, gazing down at her with such cold severity, she shrunk from him in fear and trembling, all her courage gone.

With an effort she rose to her feet; but she was still a little faint, and would have fallen had he not put out his hand to save her.

"Don't look at me like that, Abel," she murmured, faintly, "or I'll think you don't love me."

Love her! She would have fled from him in terror had she known what was passing in his mind at that moment. Even then he was calmly and dispassionately deliberating whether it would not be wiser and safer for him to silence her now forever, before she should have time to talk of what she had seen that night. He could spring upon her and strangle her. It would be but the work of a moment; and he had but to carry her body to the river and cast it into the water.

There was but one thing that deterred him, and that was the fear of detection. Marks already knew of his meetings with the girl, and he thought it probable that old Mrs. Pearson might be aware of them also.

True, Bess had promised not to tell her, but he put no great faith in any girl's promise. Not because he thought that no woman could keep a secret; his opinion of the sex was not flattering nor exalted; still, he did believe a woman could be silent and loyal—once it was made thoroughly worth her while to be so.

The question now was how could he convince Bess that it would be to her advantage to say nothing of what she had seen.

"What demon of curiosity prompted you to come here to-night?" he asked, his fingers closing tightly over her arm. "I suppose the whole village will be as wise as you before you are a day older?"

Bess was cunning; she would not contradict him. Her courage was rapidly returning; with a feeling of exultation, she realized her power over him.

"What would happen if 'twas known, Abel? I don't see what difference it would make to you."

"Don't you?" he rejoined, eagerly. "It would make this difference. There would be no carriages nor fine dresses for you in the future, I can tell you. Do you know," he hissed out from between his half-closed teeth, bending his head close to hers, and speaking in a low, concentrated voice—"do you know that if you have the sense to hold your tongue it won't be very long now before I shall be master here—master, do you hear?—master!—owner of Normanton!"

"Abel," she gasped, incredulously, his words almost taking away her breath, "I can't make it all out! You never mean that you'll be the master, and me your wife?"

Perhaps that was a little more than he did mean; at any rate, he did not immediately reply.

Bess, glancing at him sideways from beneath her long lashes, fancied she saw his dark brows contract in a frown. Once he was master, she thought he might be wanting to marry a lady; it would be safer not to wait for that time.

"I'm thinking I'll find it easier to keep the secret when I am your wife, Abel," she said. The color rushed to her cheeks and her voice trembled; but she would speak. Was it not for this she had been waiting? "I don't see what's to prevent your marrying me at once instead of putting it off. If the good fortune's coming so soon, why a few weeks can't make much difference one way or another to you; and—Abel, you know it may make so much difference to me. I'm forever dreading lest Granny shall find out about you and me. And you wouldn't like for folks to be talking about your wife, Abel, now would you?"

His stern features never relaxed, though her voice was pleading and pathetic, and tears were shining in her eyes.

She paused for a moment, hoping he might answer with some tender, reassuring words of love; but finding he remained silent, she continued:

"Abel, dear, it can't be that you don't care for me just because I've found this out? Only let me be your wife, and you'll see I'll never

so much as breathe one word! We could go away and be married on the quiet one day soon; no one need be a bit the wiser. I'd stay on here with Granny just the same. Then, when you're master here, you can claim me."

"And do you think I could allow my wife to live at the lodge?" he asked, putting his arm round her, and drawing her to him with some show of tenderness. "No, indeed; if it must be as you say, you must go away—to New York, perhaps, where I can join you in a day or two; then we can be married, and I could leave you there in some comfortable lodgings more suitable to your future position. Is not that a better plan?"

"Oh, Abel, yes, of course; you always know best. And I'll be so glad to see New York; and you'll give me money, won't you, to get dresses and things, so that when you come I'll be looking as I ought, and you wouldn't be ashamed of me?"

"Yes, yes, to be sure; you shall have all that is necessary."

He was ready to agree to anything now that he saw so easy a method of getting her out of the way. That was the first thing to be considered. Once she was safely away there would be time enough to form plans for the future. Of one thing, at any rate, he was very sure—and that was that Bess Pearson should never be his wife.

And so he smiled to himself, a smile of quiet satisfaction, as he stooped and kissed her; and foolish, trusting Bess, laid her head upon his shoulder and almost laughed out in her happiness, believing that she had triumphed at last.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BITTER END.

FRED DUNSTABLE had been a week at The Grange. He had gone home with Kate, just waited to hear that little Dora was better, and then returned by the first train, as he had said he would.

Mrs. Brereton was not a little surprised to see him back so soon. Had it been any one but Fred she would have been alarmed, for she knew that at one time he had been engaged to May, and she more than suspected that the young man had got over that attachment. She did feel a little uneasy when, not an hour after his arrival, he was starting with his fishing-rod in the direction of the river, and she even ventured to speak to him. But the look of pain on his frank, honest face made her feel ashamed of her suspicions before she had said half a dozen words. She felt herself growing red under his steady, reproachful gaze, and her little speech was concluded with almost an apology.

"I have known you so long, Fred," she said, "you must not mind my talking to you like this. It is not that I believe you capable of acting dishonorably, but I fear if you renew your acquaintance with Mrs. Langley it will only bring trouble to both of you. Poor girl! I am afraid her life is far from a happy one as it is."

"I know it," he replied, sadly; "and believe me, aunt Constance, I would sooner die than do anything which might add to her unhappiness. I shall not seek to speak to her—I may not even see her; but I have reason to know that she needs a friend, and I would be that friend. Cannot you trust me?"

He held out his hand as he spoke, and Mrs. Brereton placed hers unhesitatingly in it. Then he had left her and gone his way.

A few moments later, when he was rowing across the river, he heard voices in the wood. One he would have recognized anywhere—it was May's; the other he suspected to be Mr. Langley's.

Not wishing to be seen, he guided his boat in among some tall reeds, which completely concealed him. From there he witnessed May's interview with her husband.

He could not hear what they said, but he

could see that Mrs. Langley was greatly agitated. When she took a letter from her pocket and tore it up, he understood that it was the same letter which he had come to fetch, and that she was renouncing all intention of communicating with her uncle.

There was nothing for him to do but go back to The Grange as soon as they left the spot and the coast was clear. However, each morning he had crossed the river and searched in the hollow trunk of the fallen willow, thinking it was possible she might have changed her mind.

Though he hardly allowed the thought to frame itself, he had some hope of seeing her once more. Her face, as he had beheld it last, sad, pale, and tear-stained, had haunted him ever since. He said he would not seek to speak to her; still, if they should meet, perhaps she would confide to him; perhaps she might tell him of her trouble, and suffer him to help her.

But May never came near the river, never even entered the wood. It was seldom, if ever, that she went further than the terrace.

And so Fred could do nothing but torture himself with the thought that the woman he loved was unhappy—possibly, even ill-treated—and he was powerless to assist her.

There was no excuse for his staying here any longer. His father had already written to him, urging his return home. On the morrow he decided that he would do so.

It was more than half-past twelve, but still Fred remained out on the balcony, leaning with folded arms over the carved stone balustrade, his eyes turned in the direction of Normanton.

He could not see the house, but the tall trees marked the spot where it stood. To-morrow he would be many miles away, and it was quite within the range of possibility that he might never see May again. Well, it was better so—better for his peace of mind at any rate, he told himself. And yet he felt a strange reluctance at leaving the neighborhood.

The night was not quite dark, for there was a moon, but every now and then its light was obscured by heavy masses of cloud drifting across the sky. Angry gusts of wind swept round the house, and howled and whistled among the trees. Soon large drops of rain began to fall, and a sound of muffled thunder rolled in the distance.

He moved toward the window, but before stepping into the room turned for one last look at Normanton. With a muttered exclamation, he went quickly back to his former position.

There was a strange glow in the sky above the trees. He could not make it out. It had not been there five minutes before, or he must have seen it.

It brightened and reddened as he gazed. The windows of the hall, like fiery eyes, were visible now through the branches. What could it mean?

The rain was beating down upon his uncovered head, but still he stood there, a look of horror coming into his face, and what had at first been but a vague dread in his mind gradually growing and strengthening until it became an indisputable certainty.

Normanton Hall was on fire!

A minute later Fred was hammering away at Colonel Brereton's door.

"Hullo!" shouted the colonel, putting out his hand to feel for his revolver, which always lay ready loaded on a table near the bed. "Who's there? What's wrong?"

His thoughts instantly rushed to thieves, forgetting that, as a rule, they do not think it necessary to go through the formality of knocking before entering a room.

"Don't be alarmed, sir," said Fred, vainly endeavoring to speak calmly. "I am afraid there is something wrong at the hall. It looks to me very like a fire."

This was received by a little scream from Mrs. Brereton, who had only caught the last word.

"Fire, Fred!" she cried, excitedly. "Where?—which room?"

"Not here at all, Aunt Constance," he replied, impatiently. "At Normanton."

"Thank heaven!" she ejaculated, fervently.

"Oh, dear, what a fearful fright you gave me! I thought the house was on fire."

Mrs. Brereton was not selfish as a rule, but most people would prefer that a fire should break out in their neighbor's house than their own. She was soon full of concern for May.

In an incredibly short space of time she and her husband were dressed, and the whole household roused; and in little more than ten minutes, Fred, the colonel, and a couple of men servants had reached the water's edge, unmoored the boat and crossed the river.

The storm was raging violently. It was so dark that they could not find the path in the wood. They made their way as best they could through the wet fern, which reached knee high, and close-growing underwood; but the rain beat in their faces, and their progress was impeded by prickly bramble bushes.

Fred, always first, pushed on bravely through all, never slackening his pace, though his face and hands were scratched and bleeding. Soon he had no cause to complain of the darkness, for as he emerged from the wood, the whole neighborhood was rendered bright as day by the light from the burning building.

Flames were issuing from some of the lower windows, and wreaths of smoke curled upward toward the lowering clouds, till earth and sky alike were aglow. Hot blasts of air came toward him as he rushed up the drive, and above the howling of the storm he could hear the hissing and crackling of the fire.

The old Hall looked grand and majestic in the lurid light, its solid masonry seeming to defy the enemy which raged within its walls.

A crowd had already collected before the house.

"Are all safe? Has every one left the house?" Fred asked breathlessly of the first man he came to.

"Yes, sir, I think so. 'Twas all so sudden, there's no one seems to know nothing for certain. The fire must have broken out in half-a-dozen places at once. You see—"

"Where are Mr. and Mrs. Langley?" he interrupted impatiently.

The man pointed to a summer-house at the further end of the terrace.

"I think they are there with the servants, sir, sheltering from the storm. Ah, it's a bad night's work. I hope the scoundrel that did it will get what he deserves."

Fred was already off toward the summer-house without waiting to hear more. A group of half-dressed, frightened maid-servants were collected here. On the bench sat Mrs. Dexter, white and trembling, her teeth chattering with fear. She was wrapped in a large shawl, and was endeavoring to support her son, who, with a dazed expression on his dark face, was leaning back against the ivy-covered wall, apparently half-stupefied.

"I tell you I don't care who hears me," the cook, a tall, masculine-looking woman was saying in a high-pitched tone, as Fred approached. "I've known this long while that Abel Dexter was given to drink. I've seen him more than once as he is now, and I always said we'd be all burned in our beds one of these nights."

"Hold your tongue, Mary," began Mrs. Dexter, with ill-assumed dignity; "how dare you speak like that? You forget yourself. My son is not well; the smoke, the fright have—"

"Is Mrs. Langley here?" said Fred, coming suddenly into their midst.

The nurse who was huddled up in a corner with nothing but a thin cloak over her night-dress, and who had been weeping hysterically over some slight burps she had received, looked up as he spoke.

"I think she and the master must have gone to the lodge, sir; there's several of the servants there, too."

"Are you sure they are out of the building?"

"Yes, sir, I went to their room myself, meaning to fetch the child; but the cot was empty and my master and mistress gone. I think they must have left the house soon after the fire broke out."

Fred was hurrying off again when he met Colonel Brereton, consternation and dismay depicted on his countenance.

"My dear Fred, this is very terrible. You hear what is said? No one seems to be able to say with any certainty where Mr. and Mrs. Langley are."

"I hear that they are at the lodge," Fred replied. "I am going there now."

"Stay; it is useless," the colonel rejoined, gravely; "they are not there. I have been questioning one of the housemaids; it is she who saw them last. She was coming down from her bedroom when she passed her master and mistress going up. There is something very mysterious in this. What could their reason be for going to the third floor at a time when they could have escaped from below with comparative safety? The girl was too much concerned at her own danger to stay to address them, but she noticed that Mrs. Langley appeared wild with fright, and was clasping the baby to her breast, while her husband's chief anxiety seemed to be to hurry her forward."

"And you stay here talking, while they are in the burning house?" cried Fred excitedly.

"My boy, there is nothing to be done; it would be madness to attempt to enter the building. You must do nothing rash. I have sent a groom off on horseback for the fire-engine; but it is five miles to the town, and—"

"Good Heavens! would you do nothing until then? The Hall may be a ruin before it comes."

He dashed off, and was soon lost in the crowd. Some men were busy splicing a couple of ladders together. It was the colonel who had ordered it to be done, with the intention of entering the house himself by one of the upper windows. He was willing to risk his own life, but he did not mean to let Fred risk his if he could help it.

Fred, however, took matters pretty much into his own hands. No sooner was the ladder made secure and placed against the wall than he was mounting it. It reached to a passage window on the second floor. Luckily the hasp was unfastened; but as he threw up the sash he was almost choked and blinded by the dense volume of smoke which rushed through the opening. Scarcely pausing to recover his breath, he leapt down into the passage, and creeping along the floor on his hands and feet, at length reached the staircase.

Below was a roaring gulf of flame. The atmosphere was stifling. His skin was scorched, and each breath was torture, but still he advanced, all thought of self forgotten in the one hope of saving May.

When he reached the landing of the third floor he hesitated, uncertain which way to turn. It was then that a strange sound smote his ears. He could scarcely credit his senses—some one was laughing! A shout of wild, exultant laughter echoed through the house! At the same time the door of a room to his right was suddenly thrown open, and Mr. Langley appeared, half dragging, half carrying his terrified wife, who still clasped the baby convulsively to her.

"Oh, it is glorious—glorious!" cried her husband, ecstatically. "Why don't you rejoice, May, as I do, to think that our martyrdom is almost ended? Are we not about to die a martyr's death? Come, let us get out on the roof and take up our station as we should, at the top of the pile! Oh, it is a fine pile—a noble pile! See what a worthy fire I have lighted for us by which to die! Death would have stolen you from me first, and left me here with the child; but I have cheated him, for we shall go together! How could I part from you, when I had risked so much to win you? I knew to what I sacrificed you when I made you my wife; but I loved you so! No matter,

our troubles will soon be over now—so soon, so very soon!"

Again he laughed discordantly. With a supreme effort, May succeeded in wrenching herself free from his grasp. Then a shrill cry of joy escaped her, for at the same moment her eyes fell on Fred.

"Save me—save my child!" she shrieked. "Oh, Fred, he does not know what he does! He would destroy us all! Do you not see?—do you not understand? *He is mad!*"

No need to say that now. Fred had understood it all only too well. There was no mistaking the vacant stare of those wildly rolling eyes. A look of baffled rage came into Mr. Langley's face when he saw Fred.

"So you have come to take me at last!" he shouted, "but it is too late. Death was here before you, he will save me even from you. You would have deprived me of my liberty, imprisoned me, tortured me! You would have published to the world that I was mad. Well, and it is true. I am mad, mad, mad! I care not who hears me now; but all my life no one has known it—no one but Dexter and his mother. They kept the secret well—oh, very well! But still my wife found it out. Who told you?" he asked, abruptly. Then, pausing, he glanced in doubt from one to the other. When he next spoke, the words came in a hissing whisper from between his white, drawn-back lips. "Did May send for you? Was it my wife who betrayed me?"

There was murder in his eyes as they rested on the shrinking, trembling girl. Fred knew that the danger which threatened her now was more terrible than that from which he had come to save her.

He might perhaps have saved her from the fire, but what was his strength, compared with that of a madman? And they had no time to lose; already the fire was creeping along the passage, and the boards were growing hot beneath their feet.

May clung to him frantically, not realizing that she was hampering his movements, and preventing him from defending himself. He put one arm around her, and raised the other ready to ward off his antagonist. But he knew he was powerless to protect her.

It had come to this—they must die; but at least they could die together.

Mr. Langley took a step forward; he was about to spring upon them. May did not cry out, but she closed her eyes and laid her face on Fred's shoulder.

Suddenly the madman paused and looked round. There was a sound behind him—the sound of approaching footsteps! Then a shout came from the further end of the passage, and the next moment Colonel Brereton came hurrying toward them, followed by a couple of men.

"Thank Heaven, we have found you!" he cried. "This way, Mr. Langley; bring your wife. Come, Fred, there is yet time; we can escape from the roof of the billiard-room."

But as he reached them, Mr. Langley pushed Fred aside, and rushed past toward the top of the stairs. Seizing one of the blazing rails of the balusters, he stood waving it wildly above his head. Then, with a piercing shriek of mad laughter that none of them would ever forget he tossed the burning brand from him, and throwing up his arms, leaped down the awful gulf of flame that curled and cracked and roared in the abyss below.

CHAPTER IX.

ALL'S WELL THAT END'S WELL.

THREE months have gone by since the tragic occurrences of the last chapter. The village gossips had long since wearied of discussing the fire at Normanton, and the old house itself was being repaired and rebuilt. Little was left of it save the outer walls; but numerous workmen were already busy there, and it was said the Hall would be once more habitable by the beginning of the new year.

Mrs. Langley had been very ill for several weeks after that terrible night on which her husband had lost his life. She had been carried to the Grange, and there for some time had lain between life and death. As soon as she was able to think of anything, she had asked for her baby.

It had died many days before; but they hesitated to tell her the truth. The child had always been sickly and ailing, and the exposure on the night of the fire brought on an inflammation from which it never recovered. It lingered for a few days, seldom crying as other babies would have done, but just lying passively in its cot, with a pitiful expression of suffering and endurance on its strangely old-looking little face. Then it had passed away, almost without a moan. May received the news better than they could have hoped. She heard all they had to say, and then, turning to the wall, shed a few silent tears.

When the child was born she had almost prayed it might die; but since then it had grown very dear to her. She had learned to love the little solemn face, so unlike the faces of other children. And yet there had been times when she had turned from it in fear; for the large eyes would be raised to hers with a look in them so painfully like its father, that it made her tremble with a dread foreboding.

How could she mourn its loss when she knew the terrible fate which awaited it? There is little doubt, had it lived, that it would later on have developed the same fatal symptoms of madness as those to which Mr. Langley had been subject.

When she was well enough to be moved, her uncle came to fetch her, and she went back with him to her old home. Mr. Sandford had aged greatly since she had seen him last, and there were lines about the kind old face which were not caused by time alone. May never divined how much he had missed her, until she saw the change which her absence had caused in him.

Should she ever be able to make up to him for what she had made him suffer? She must never leave him again—never! She and uncle Gregory and old Patience would go on living the quiet, peaceful life they had lived long ago.

But even as she told herself this, she knew it could never be quite the same again. She had been a child then, happy and thoughtless, without a care in the world; now, she was a woman saddened and aged by sorrow. When she regarded herself in the little mirror, which had in the old days so often reflected her smiling, girlish face, she believed even her beauty was a thing of the past. Yet, had she known it, there was an added charm in the mournful depths of her eyes that had been wanting before, and a new beauty in the pathetic droop of the sensitive mouth.

It was evening now. Without, the shadows of the night were spreading over the dreary landscape; a damp mist hung over everything; the brown and yellow leaves were fast falling from the trees and lying thickly on the garden paths.

The old gardener, who had been endeavoring to collect them, shook his head hopelessly as he saw fresh showers of them come fluttering down at every gust of wind as fast as he had raked them away.

He got together his tools presently and moved toward the house, glad to exchange the damp atmosphere of the garden for the comfortable warmth of the kitchen.

Within, in the library, the light from the leaping flames of a wood fire cast a ruddy glow around, making the gilt frames of the pictures on the walls, and the many brass nails in the bookcases, shine and glitter. It smiled up into Uncle Gregory's kindly face, and rested tenderly on May's bowed head, brightening the coils of dark hair.

She had been reading aloud until it grew too dusk; now she sat on a stool at the old man's feet, one hand lying listlessly across the open book.

Both were busy with their own thoughts; so preoccupied that they did not hear a stealthy tread on the path outside, nor see a pale face pressed close to the window-pane, gazing yearningly, longingly, hopelessly into the comfortable room.

By and by May raised her head and looked up with a sigh.

"Uncle Gregory," she said, "there are one or two things I want you to tell me. I have never asked you anything about—about Normanton since I have been here."

"No, my dear, and I have not liked to be the first to mention it for fear of paining you; but it is better that you should know all. The property does not belong to you now; it has passed into other hands."

"I am glad," she replied, musingly; "I could never have lived there. Had it been mine I should have sold it. But I did not expect to have Normanton, for I knew Duke had made a will leaving it to Abel Dexter; he confessed this to me only the day before the fire. I understood afterward what he meant, when he added that Dexter should not have the Hall if he had the property."

She paused, shuddering.

"But he has neither the one nor the other," interrupted Mr. Sandford. "Mr. Langley's cousin is the heir. The will was valueless—do you not understand?"

He hesitated, not knowing how to explain.

"You mean that no will made by any one in my husband's state of health could be legal." She spoke unfalteringly though with an effort. "And so Dexter and his mother will have nothing, though they planned and schemed and made so sure of all. Oh, uncle Gregory, they have been justly punished! Hark! What is that?"

A low, wailing cry came from the garden. She rose hastily and went toward the window. It was almost dark now; but a ray of light from within stretched across the path and showed her something lying there—the form of a woman.

She went out, calling to the servants to follow her.

In a few minutes they brought the stranger into the hall, and the lamp-light fell upon her. Then May, who had been tenderly supporting her, started back with a cry. It was Mrs. Dexter!

Yes, it was the same woman, though the cheeks were gaunt and hollow from hunger and privation; and the dark eyes, so bold and defiant of old, were now gazing up into hers imploringly.

"For Heaven's sake give me food!" the woman cried faintly. "I am starving!"

May did not hesitate even for a moment. As those beseeching, hopeless tones fell upon her ears, she forgot the many indignities she had endured at her hands—forgot all that this woman had made her suffer; forgot everything, save that a human being was ill and in want, and that it was in her power to help her.

Half an hour later, Mrs. Dexter was in bed, enjoying that perfect rest which is so grateful after long fatigue. She had walked the ten long miles from the city to find May. In her dire distress there had been no one to whom she could look for help, no one to whom she dared apply with any hope of success, but the girl she had so cruelly wronged.

May saw that she had all that was necessary, and then left her, thinking she might sleep. But when, some hours later, she returned, Mrs. Dexter was still awake. There were traces of tears on her face and her cheeks were flushed.

"I am glad you have come," she began, excitedly. "I could not have slept until I had spoken to you. I want you to say you forgive me. I have been thinking of things as I lay here alone. I have so often thought of them of late—so often! I never doubted that you would give me food, and perhaps a lodging for the night; but I did not expect you would seem sorry for me. You said awhile ago, when I was by the window, that I had been justly

punished, but you never guessed how bitter my punishment really is. It was for Abel that I sinned—for him that I was ready to sin even more. And he has left me!—left me to starve—me, his mother!”

“Do not speak of these things now,” urged May. “You will make yourself ill. Try and go to sleep; to-morrow, if you wish it, you shall tell me more.”

“No, no! I must speak—it relieves me; I have kept silent so long. I could have forgiven him if he had written or given me something to keep me from the workhouse; but he has gone out West without one word, taking with him all that had taken us so many years to scrape together. He has not Normanton, but he will be rich—yes, rich—while I am a beggar! I taught him to think only of himself, and he learned the lesson well. Oh, my boy! my boy! I was so proud of him—so proud of his handsome face and gentlemanly ways. I should have been content to stand aside when he was master of Normanton if he would have had it so. It would have been enough for me to have seen him in his right place—for it was his right place—and now it has come to this?”

She half-raised herself upon one arm, and pushed back the hair from her hot brow.

May was silent, thinking her mind wandered, but it was not so.

“Look at me,” she went on, excitedly. “You would not think now that I had ever been beautiful? No, I know you would not; but it is true. I was so beautiful that Mr. Langley fell in love with me and promised to marry me, though I was but his sister’s maid.”

“You do not know what you are saying,” interrupted May, indignantly. “I will not believe it.”

“Oh, I don’t mean your husband; I am speaking of his father. He was going abroad for some months; but he promised that when he returned he would make me his wife and acknowledge my boy. I was a fool, believed him, trusted him, and waited. When he did return he brought his wife with him. A dark, handsome Italian woman she was. How I hated her! Yet I made no sign; and when he came to me with money and gifts, to purchase my silence, I took them and promised to hold my tongue; but to myself I swore that I would be revenged. One day he came to me and begged that I would go and nurse his wife. She was not liked in the neighborhood, and had few friends. He paid me handsomely, and I went. It did not take me long to discover what it was that had made Mr. Langley look so haggard and unhappy of late, and why he had allowed his wife to go so little into society. She was mad! Rational enough at times, but at others a raving lunatic. In one of her most violent fits her son was born—my boy’s half-brother!”

May covered her face with her hands, and shuddered convulsively.

It was this terrible malady which Duke had inherited.

“Go on,” she murmured faintly.

“There is not much more to say,” Mrs. Dexter said, with a weary sigh. “Mrs. Langley died a few years after. She was drowned. People thought it an accident at the time, but I knew better; I knew it was suicide. Her husband sent for me, and made me promise never to leave his son. You may guess why; I alone knew his secret.

“With so much power in my hands, no wonder I abused the trust. I taught the boy to fear me. I encouraged him to believe that if his cousin, the next heir, knew of his insanity he would have him confined in an asylum. He lived in perpetual dread of this, till at last it became a mania. Abel and I lost no opportunity of talking of the horrors which took place in madhouses, and of the tortures he would have to endure if he were sent there.

“This went on until old Mr. Langley died, and Marmaduke became his heir. It was for this we had waited. We forced him to make a will leaving everything to Abel. It was while my son was away at Normanton, having

the Hall made ready to receive us, that Mr. Langley made your acquaintance, and married you.”

“I know the rest,” said May, sadly.

“No, no; you do not. You do not know that we were so afraid of his betraying himself at last and telling the truth for your sake, that we had determined to give him an opportunity of destroying himself. We knew in his paroxysms of madness the desire of self-destruction was always strong, and we decided to leave open the door of the room in which, at those times, he was confined, never doubting that he would take advantage of it, and perhaps drown himself, as his mother had done. Then Abel would have had at last what should have been his all along.

“But now he is gone, and I feel I shall never see my boy again. And from whom do you think I heard that he had left the East? It was Bess Pearson that told me.”

“Then it is true what was said—it was was through your son that Bess left her home?”

“Yes; I met her in New York some weeks ago. He had deserted her, too. But what could she expect? Did she think a gentleman like my Abel would ever stoop to marry such as she? She was poor—very poor, for the little money he had left with her was spent long ago. She was earning a few cents a day selling flowers. I had disliked the girl before, and she had hated me for my pride; but we clung together in our common misery, and she shared her hardly-earned crust with me.

“For shame’s sake she would not go home to her grandmother; she dared not face her old friends. But poverty and hunger soon brought down her pride; she started for Normanton yesterday morning to walk all the way, and beg her food on the road, for she had no money. Then, when I was alone, I could think of no one who would give me even a piece of bread but you, and so I came here.

“There! I have told you all. Perhaps I have been a fool for my pains; for now, no doubt, you will turn me away, and there will be nothing left for me but the workhouse. Good Heavens, the workhouse! And I thought to be mistress of Normanton!”

But May did not turn her away; she let her stay until she had gained strength, and then she put her in the way of some honest employment that was suited to her. But Mrs. Dexter had lived so long for her son that she did not even care to try to live without him; she would not want anything very much longer.

For some months Mrs. Langley’s uneventful life went on, without one single incident to break the monotony. She was growing just a little weary of the days so much like each other, and was beginning to ask herself in some dismay if it would be always like this.

Kate Dunstable came to stop with her in the spring. No one could be dull with Kate, so the girls were happy enough together; but Kate would be going away soon, and then the dreary routine would begin again. They tacitly agreed not to mention the past, so the dark page of May’s brief married life was not turned.

There was another subject on which Kate kept a marked silence, which did not please May so well. This was the sayings and doings of her brother Fred. Only once did she voluntarily speak of him—it was two days before she left.

May was sitting half in and half out of the open window, her lap full of purple and white violets and ferns, which she was arranging into a bouquet. Every now and then she glanced furtively across at her friend, who was writing at a little table at the further end of the room.

“Kate,” she said, presently, “I can see you are troubling about something. What is it?”

Kate laid down her pen with a sigh, and rested her head on her hand.

“I am troubled,” she replied, sadly. “It is about Fred. He is talking of leaving us all, and going to Australia. We have an uncle there, and he thinks of joining him for a year or two.”

“To Australia!” echoed May, with a sinking at the heart. “Oh, Kate, you must not let him go!”

“I fear nothing I can say would make much difference, she rejoined. “He is reckless and unsettled. There is only one woman in the whole world who can speak the word that would keep him.”

“And who is that?” May asked, faintly, without looking up.

She had only seen Fred two or three times since that dreadful night, when they had been ready to face death together, and on each occasion he had seemed to her cold and distant.

“Yourself, dear. But, May, do not look so grieved. It is not your fault that you can not love him. We will not speak of it again.”

Not speak of it again! May bent her head low down over her flowers, her heart beating wildly. What could she do? She could not tell him that she loved him before he asked her, and yet, if she made no sign, he would go away and perhaps she might never see him again.

Kate had taken up her pen again, and was finishing her letter. Soon it would be folded and sealed. If she would speak, it must be now.

She rose tremblingly, and crossing the room, went behind Kate’s chair, and putting her arms round her friend’s neck, laid her burning cheek against hers.

“Kate,” she whispered, softly, “tell him—tell him not to go.”

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